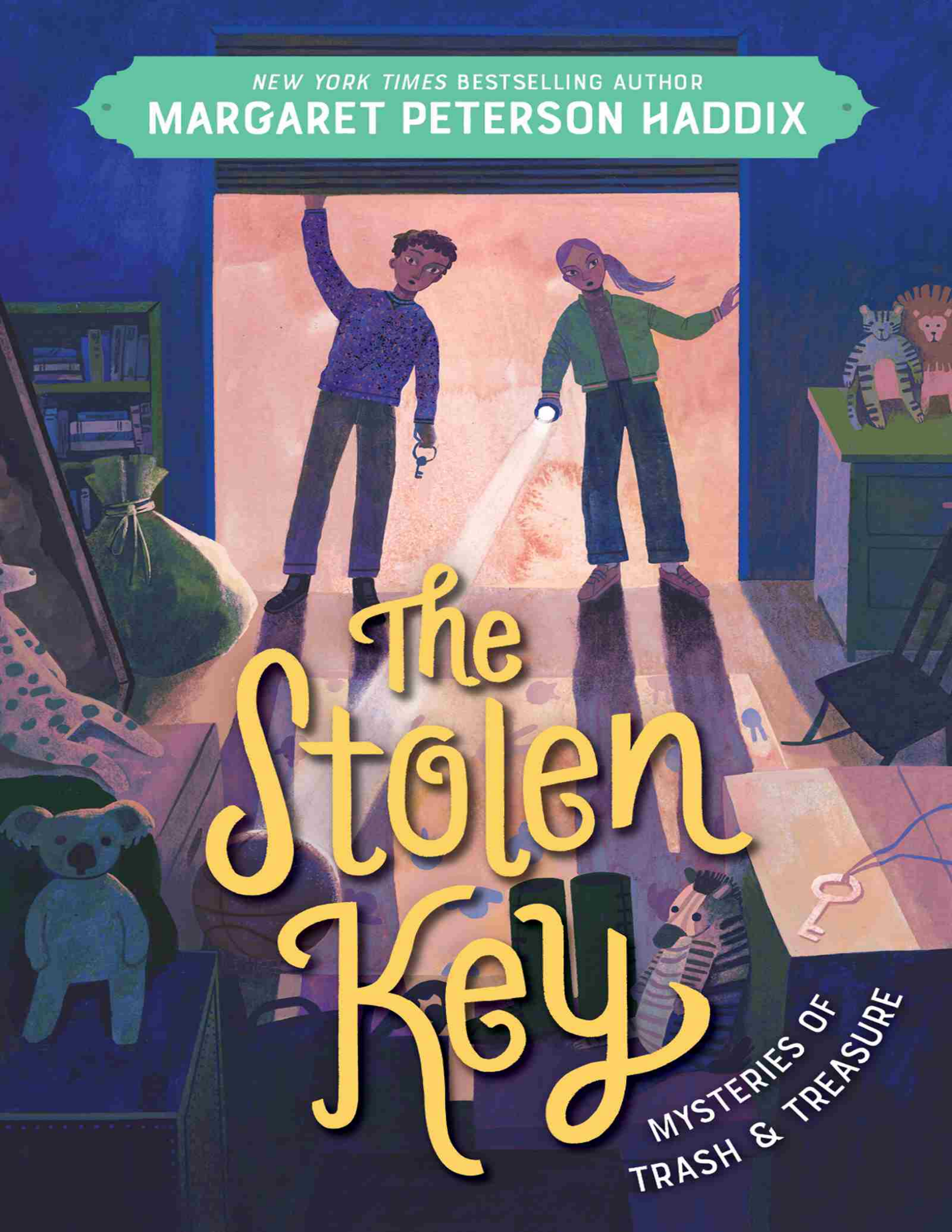


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX



The Stolen Key

MYSTERIES OF
TRASH & TREASURE

• MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX •

MYSTERIES OF
TRASH & TREASURE

The Stolen Key

Quill Tree Books
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Dedication

For Doug

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The Beginning

Colin just wanted to figure out who he was.

Then someone sent him a key.

Funny thing about keys, though.

Even when you find the lock they open . . .

Even when you turn the key and open the door and stand there with everything laid out before you . . .

That still doesn't always mean you understand.

Yet.

1

The Mysterious Package

Colin found the box on his porch at dawn.

Nothing about that was normal. Colin never got up early unless he had to, and when he did, it was almost always because Mom was prodding him along, constantly reminding him, “I know you want to go back to sleep, but you really have to get moving. . . .”

This morning, Colin was on the porch alone.

Boxes were also not a common sight on the Creedmonts’ porch. The Creedmonts weren’t like the other families on their street, who were constantly ordering things from Amazon or the online sites for Target or Walmart (or whatever). *Other* people were the reason the Amazon and UPS and FedEx and USPS trucks were constantly maneuvering up and down the Creedmonts’ street, dodging parked cars and leaving behind cardboard boxes on doormats.

Colin’s mom thought online shopping was practically a sin—or, at least, *excessive* online shopping was. She had a whole spiel about how it was too easy. People, she said, got a one-second rush of happiness from clicking Buy buttons for stuff they didn’t actually need or want. But they’d really only bought themselves years of annoyance at having a cluttered house, and not being able to find the objects they truly did care about in the midst of all those useless, wasteful purchases.

Colin’s mom ran a business called Possession Curation, which was all about helping people get rid of clutter so they could enjoy their more meaningful belongings. In a snarky, obnoxious mood, Colin could have argued that Mom needed people to keep shopping, so they would also keep hiring her to declutter their houses.

But Colin usually wasn’t snarky or obnoxious.

At least, he hadn't been that way before this summer.

Or, more precisely, before last week.

Last week, his father had died.

Colin was still getting used to how that fact felt, how the words sounded in his head: *My father is dead*. He'd never met his father—or, anyway, hadn't seen his father since Colin was a baby, which of course he didn't remember. So if someone had asked Colin a month ago or a year ago if it would matter for his dad to just up and die, Colin probably would have said no. He would have said, *What's the difference?*

But it did matter.

It was different.

In fact, it was the reason Colin had awakened so early today.

Yesterday he'd told his friend Nevaeh he was ready to find out everything he could about his father. He was ready to find out why his mother said his father was a bad person. He was ready to find out why his father had signed away all his rights to see Colin, to watch him grow up. Nevaeh and Colin had been on the verge of doing a Google search for his father's name—the first step.

And then Nevaeh's sister had texted to say that she had to pick up Nevaeh early, and . . . Colin had chickened out.

No way was Colin doing his search alone.

But that meant that Colin couldn't sleep last night. And, as he tossed and turned, it also meant that the normally cozy house he shared with his mom felt too confining. It meant that, when the first glimmer of dawn peeked through his windows, he'd felt like he had to escape.

He'd stumbled out onto their front porch like a dying man gasping for air.

Wait, no—don't think about dying. . . .

He started to lose his balance and kicked out his right foot to the side. His foot struck something—something that wasn't supposed to be there. Because, at the Creedmont house, even the porch was always tidy and orderly, with nothing out of place.

Colin bent down, feeling around on the doormat. The light was so dim, he had his hands firmly around the box before he properly saw it. He blinked, trying to get his eyes to focus. The box was small and rectangular, and wrapped in brown mailing paper. It had a name and address written on the top, but no return address, no mailing label, no stamps.

No one *official* had placed this box on the Creedmonts' porch. It hadn't been delivered by a postal carrier, an Amazon driver, a UPS or FedEx employee.

Colin stood up, lifting the box toward the light.

His name was on the box. It was addressed to him.

"Oh, right—*Nevaeh*," he muttered, leaning back against the doorway in relief. He grinned, trying to decide whether the box's contents were more likely to be a prank or a care package. Though, what did it matter? Either would be a reminder that he had a good friend—that he mattered a whole lot to someone besides just Mom.

He slid his finger under the tape holding the brown mailing paper in place. Knowing *Nevaeh*—knowing how *her* family rolled—she'd probably want him to avoid ripping the paper, so she could have it back to reuse. *Nevaeh* was a Greevey, and her dad was the Junk King of Groveview, Ohio. His official motto was, "I love junk!" But *Nevaeh* joked sometimes that his real motto was, "Give me your trash, and I'll convince someone else it's actually treasure, so I can sell it for double what you paid!"

So the Greeveys never threw away anything. The way they lived was pretty much the exact opposite of how Colin and his mom lived. If Colin's mom said something was black, *Nevaeh's* dad would say it was white. If *Nevaeh's* dad said something was up, Colin's mom would say it was down. And everything Colin's mom saw as trash, *Nevaeh's* dad saw as treasure. And vice versa.

Because of that, Colin's mom and *Nevaeh's* dad had despised each other for about as long as Colin and *Nevaeh* had been alive. So: twelve years. They'd seen each other as bitter rivals. Then this summer, because of Colin and *Nevaeh*, the two families had started working together, coordinating their efforts. At first, that change had been a little bumpy. But this week they were getting along.

Because of my father dying. Because Mr. Greevey is actually a nice person, underneath it all, and he feels sorry for Mom. And . . . for me.

The brown mailing paper fell away, revealing a shoebox—but a small shoebox, sized for a baby's shoes. Maybe a toddler's.

Yeah, this is definitely from Nevaeh, Colin thought, grinning again.

It had been a summer full of shoeboxes. That was partly because he and *Nevaeh* were both working in their parents' businesses, cleaning out attics and basements and closets and storage areas and sometimes even

whole houses. And it was ridiculous how many people in Groveview seemed to think shoeboxes were for storing anything *but* shoes. Colin didn't mind. He and Nevaeh had come across three different particularly interesting shoeboxes over the course of the summer—two full of secret letters, one full of ghostly photos. After the first two shoeboxes, Colin and Nevaeh had started their own business for solving mysteries. And if he said so himself, they'd done that really well.

Colin turned the box over—right side up—and his grin faded. A green Post-it Note fluttered from the top of the box. Even before Colin had puzzled out the words on it, he could tell: this wasn't Nevaeh's handwriting.

For that matter, the handwriting on the wrapping paper hadn't been Nevaeh's, either.

Then he read the Post-it Note, and he *knew* there was no way this box was from Nevaeh. She would never play such a cruel prank. Or, if it was meant sincerely, she would know better than to get his hopes up so high.

Because, what the Post-it Note said was:

Your father wanted you to have this.

2

What Nevaeh Knew

Nevaeh's phone buzzed.

It buzzed again.

And again.

And then it rang, one shrill peal of sound in the dark bedroom in what felt like the middle of the night.

"Murder most foul would be too good for whoever that is," Nevaeh's sister, Prilla, growled from across the room. Nevaeh was pretty sure that "murder most foul" was a Shakespeare quote, so it was kind of impressive that Prilla could be awakened from a deep sleep and immediately go into acting mode.

"Sorry," Nevaeh mumbled, not quite awake yet herself. She'd been in the middle of a good dream about hanging out with Colin and their friend Ree and . . . it was completely gone now. She grabbed her phone from the nightstand between her bed and Prilla's, and silenced it. "Gotta be a garbage call. Nobody I know would call at . . ." She squinted at the ancient clock radio Prilla had rescued from some junk pile somewhere. "Six-oh-seven a.m.?"

Prilla stuck an arm out from under her covers. "Hand it over. Don't you have the spam blocker on? Let's fix that or they might call back."

"But I'm sure I set it up right," Nevaeh complained. She'd gotten her phone only last year, at the start of sixth grade. And that had felt so momentous. She'd been determined to do everything properly, even if her phone was just a hand-me-down with a screen someone else had already cracked. And she'd been listening for years to everything Prilla and their three brothers—Roddy, Dalton, and Axel—had ever said about phones. The advantage (and disadvantage) of being the youngest of five kids was

that someone was always telling her what to do. She peered at the phone's screen. "Oh, wait. That call was from Colin. After he texted me again and again and . . ."

Prilla sat halfway up, propped on her elbows.

"Everything okay?"

"Don't know," Nevaeh said. "I better call him back."

She slid out of bed and headed for the door.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do," Prilla said.

But Nevaeh barely heard her. She paused on the landing outside their bedroom to text Colin, **Give me a minute. Going somewhere private.**

She tiptoed down the stairs. Most mornings, Dad or one of Nevaeh's brothers would be up by now, especially if it was a day with a lot of junk runs. But the first floor of the house was still silent and dark. Nevaeh glanced again at Colin's string of texts—**Call me as soon as you see this!** and **Seriously, can you call right now?** and **Please???**—and she kept going. She unlocked and stepped out the back door. But she waited until she was halfway to her family's barn before she swiped her finger across her phone's screen to call Colin back.

"Thank you!" Colin's voice exploded in her ear on the first ring. "Listen, hang up and call me on, like, FaceTime or Zoom. You've got to see this!"

"See what?" Nevaeh asked.

But she switched over to FaceTime, driven by the urgency in Colin's tone.

Also, Colin didn't usually boss her around. Usually it was her telling him what to do.

When he answered this time, his pale face glowed in an unfamiliar darkness.

"Where are you?" Nevaeh asked. "Have you been kidnapped? You look like you're in a hostage video. Blink once if you need me to rescue you. Blink twice if—"

"This isn't a joke!" Colin hissed. "I'm hiding in our shed. Mom can't see this. She can't know I'm out here. She can't . . . what if she'd been the one who found the box?"

"What box?" Nevaeh asked. She wondered if maybe she was still stuck in a dream, after all. Colin usually made more sense than this.

Colin didn't answer. Instead, he seemed to be turning his phone around. And maybe he'd simultaneously picked up a flashlight, because Nevaeh got a dizzying view of a circle of light on the wall of the Creedmonts' shed—showing a green garden hose neatly coiled and hung on a hook, a spade and a pruning fork and a shovel lined up just so, exactly the way Nevaeh would have imagined Colin's mother organized everything in her life.

The same way Nevaeh wished she could organize her own life.

And then the light and the phone screen were aimed at a small box on the clean-swept concrete floor, right by Colin's feet. Nevaeh's view of the box zoomed closer and closer—Colin must be crouching down. Finally the box was close enough that Nevaeh could read the Post-it stuck to the top:

Your father wanted you to have this.

Nevaeh gasped.

"Is that for real? What's inside?"

"I don't know! I'm scared to open it!"

Nevaeh resisted the urge to say, *What's wrong with you?* She would have popped the lid off that box first thing.

But she knew what was wrong—not *with* Colin, but *for* Colin. She couldn't quite imagine what it would be like having a father who'd never wanted to see his own kid. She couldn't quite imagine not being part of a cozy, close-knit (though often maddening) family with two loving parents and what sometimes felt like too many siblings. And what always felt like too much junk.

But she could see how to be a good friend to Colin.

"Want me to come over there and open it for you?" she asked.

"Yes!" Colin cried. "I mean, no! I can't wait that long. Can you just . . . stay on the phone with me while I open it?"

"Sure," Nevaeh said. "Prop up the phone somewhere, and . . ."

Colin already seemed to be leaning his phone against the wall. He put the flashlight down, too, so now Nevaeh had an off-kilter view of a stream of light across the concrete floor. The light was aimed at the side of the box; now Nevaeh could make out the words "Fendi" and "Crib Shoes."

Fendi was an expensive brand—Nevaeh knew that from working for her dad's junk removal business. Anytime the family came across anything labeled Fendi, her dad crowed with joy and started calculating how much he was going to make reselling it on Poshmark or thredUP.

But “*crib shoes*”? Nevaeh thought. She’d learned this summer that people put all sorts of things in shoeboxes. Still, if it did turn out to be nothing but baby shoes . . . well, Nevaeh needed to figure out how to console Colin.

Colin put both hands on the box lid, his every move throwing off eerie shadows in the glow of the flashlight. The way he was acting, you’d think he was about to wrestle a poisonous snake, not merely open a box that didn’t seem to be taped or fastened together in any way. As far as Nevaeh could tell, all he needed to do was lift.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, he began to raise the lid.

He gulped.

He dropped the lid to the floor and reached into the box.

“What is it?” Nevaeh demanded. “What do you see?”

Colin pulled up his hand, something metallic dangling from his fingers.

“It’s a key,” he said. “But . . . there’s nothing else with it. Not a note or anything. I don’t know what it’s a key *to*.”

Colin moved his hand closer to his phone, and Nevaeh watched the key dangle from an orange key chain with gold lettering.

Nevaeh clapped her hand over her mouth.

“I do,” she said. “I know exactly where that key fits.”

3

Colin and the Key

“You know . . . exactly?” Colin asked, gulping again. He felt faint. He felt like he might throw up. He felt like the shed was spinning around him, and he wouldn’t have been surprised if the box or the key flew up and hit him in the face.

Nevaeh’s voice seemed to come at him from a million miles away.

“Look at the key chain,” Nevaeh said. “Isn’t that the logo for Steve’s Self-Storage?”

“Oh,” Colin said. He picked up the flashlight and aimed it at the little plastic tag. The key chain did indeed contain three stylized Ss in a crude, amateurish design that made Colin think Steve had created it himself, and Steve really should have taken some art classes first. Below the Ss, very tiny print spelled out the address for Steve’s Self-Storage: 1000 Uhrlin Road, Groveview, Ohio. “So it’s a key to a . . . a storage unit? How are we supposed to know which one?”

“We could ask Steve,” Nevaeh suggested. Colin could tell how much she hated that idea. Steve Owens, the owner of the town’s one and only self-storage business, was a friend of Nevaeh’s dad. But that didn’t mean Nevaeh got along with him. “Or we could just walk up and down out there, trying the key in every lock. But Steve would see us on his security cameras.” On the phone screen, Nevaeh had her nose wrinkled in disgust. “Or . . . can you look closer at the key? I think at Steve’s, he always engraves the unit number on the key itself.”

Colin brought the flashlight beam closer to the key. The number 32 was indeed etched into the metal.

“I don’t understand,” Colin said. “Remember how much my mom hates storage units?”

He'd heard her rant about storage units nearly as much as about online shopping. Storage units, she said, were for people who couldn't quite take the final step to truly curate their possessions—actually getting rid of the items they didn't need or want. Instead, they spent hundreds or thousands of dollars a year to store things they might never look at again.

Mom pitied people who paid for storage units. And she thought of Steve the way she might view a drug dealer: as someone who took advantage of other people's weaknesses. Someone who encouraged an addiction.

"Right, but . . . if this is a storage unit your *dad* set up or paid for . . ."

Even in the grainy phone-screen video, it was clear that Nevaeh was wrinkling her nose again. But it was in a sympathetic way now. An "I'm sorry I have to point this out" way. "Your parents got divorced. And it sounds like it wasn't a . . . friendly . . . divorce. Sometimes divorced couples kind of take revenge on each other. One person will do something the other person hates just to make them mad. What if this is just . . . catching you in the middle?"

Colin had to stop himself from snarling back, *What do you know about divorced couples?*

It wasn't fair to blame Nevaeh just because she had two parents who had always loved her—and three brothers and a sister and grandparents and, like, dozens of aunts and uncles and cousins who loved her, too. It wasn't her fault Colin only had his mother. Nevaeh and her family also had hundreds of friends, and somewhere in there, she probably had witnessed a friend or two with divorced parents. Nevaeh just *knew* about people.

Colin mostly just knew what he and his mom were like. Sometimes he felt like he'd grown up on a different planet from everyone else.

Having his father die made that feeling worse.

But Nevaeh stuck by me, he reminded himself. *So did my other friends.*

And Nevaeh had gotten up before sunrise to talk him through opening a stupid shoebox he'd been too cowardly to open all by himself.

He couldn't snap at Nevaeh.

"You're saying this key might not be a good thing," he muttered. "You're saying maybe I should just forget about it. Not even go to Steve's and open the lock."

"Oh, no," Nevaeh said. On the phone screen now, her eyes were wide and surprised. She shoved an unruly strand of her thick, dirty-blond hair

out of her face. The world was lighting up around her—a few moments ago, he hadn't been able to see what color her hair was. "Of course we're going to go open that lock. Just . . . don't get too excited about it until we see what's there."

"That's like asking me not to breathe," Colin grumbled. "But . . . you know I can't tell Mom about this. You know I can't ask her to drive us there."

He had only a vague idea of where Steve's Self-Storage was. But he knew it was outside the city limits and beyond any sidewalks—too far away and on too busy of a road for him to walk or ride a bike there. And Nevaeh and her family lived way out in the country themselves, so anytime she went anywhere, she had to get someone to drive her.

"Yeah . . ." On the phone screen, Nevaeh seemed to be staring off into the distance, her eyes unfocused. "And you know if I asked Prilla or Dad or one of my brothers to take us, they'd ask questions." Suddenly she snapped her fingers. "But Mom won't, not when she's coming off the night shift!" Nevaeh's mom worked nights at the county hospital as an X-ray technician.

"Did she work last night?" Colin felt a surge of hope.

"Seven to seven, so . . . can you be ready for her to pick you up in forty-five minutes?"

Colin glanced toward the door behind him. What were the odds he could sneak out of the shed and back into the house, get dressed in the dark, and then sneak back out again without waking his mom? His chances weren't great, but . . . he peered down at the key dangling from his hand again. He had to try.

"Sure," he told Nevaeh.

"I'll tell her to get you first, then me, then drop us both off at Steve's," Nevaeh said. Her fingers hovered over her phone, as if she was all ready to send a text.

"Then who'll pick us up afterward?" Colin asked. "After . . . after we've seen what's in the storage unit . . . and found out what my father wanted me to have?"

He could hear the shakiness in his own voice, the way he could easily start crying if he let his guard down.

On the phone screen, Nevaeh winced. She knew. She understood.

But then she flashed him her biggest, most reassuring grin.

“Oh, we’ll figure that out later,” Nevaeh said. “After we solve this mystery! Everything’s going to be fine! This is the best plan, ever!”

4

What the Key Unlocked

Nevaeh's mom yawned so widely, her jaw made a cracking sound.

"Who did you say told you to start work this early?" she asked as she drove. "Should I report my own husband for unfair child labor practices? Or, Colin, is this your mom's fault?"

"Mom, really, Colin and I are okay with this," Nevaeh said quickly, dodging the question. "It's going to be so hot later today, we volunteered to start working on this storage unit as soon as we could get there."

"Seems like your dad or Felicia should have driven you themselves," Mom grumbled half-heartedly. "If they're making you get up early, they should, too."

"Well, it's kind of . . . a surprise," Nevaeh said, glancing at Colin in the back seat to make sure he heard this change in their official story. But he was peering out the window, his face pale and mostly hidden by his dark, curly hair.

Mom took one hand off the steering wheel to rub her eyes.

"Guess I should be proud of your work ethic, then," she muttered. "But you know the rules—you have to talk to me to keep me awake. It was a *long* night."

"Any interesting cases?" Nevaeh asked.

Mom reached over and ruffled Nevaeh's already-messy hair.

"Maybe you'll be the kid who follows me into the medical field," she said wistfully.

Nevaeh felt guilty. She had no interest in medicine—she didn't even like clutter, let alone blood, guts, vomit, pee, or poop. Or whatever other gross bodily substances medical people had to deal with.

But she faked a smile, even though Mom looked too sleepy to notice.

“Of course, I can’t assume I’ve lost Prilla and Roddy to the junk world, like I did with Axel and Dalton,” Mom murmured. “There’s still time for them to follow in my footsteps.”

Nevaeh felt even guiltier. *She* knew that Prilla and Prilla’s twin brother, Roddy—who were both about to start their senior year of high school—had already decided what they wanted to do with their lives. They both wanted to go to college so Roddy could study theoretical physics and Prilla could become a drama teacher. Nevaeh also knew that the twins were putting off telling Dad that. They didn’t want him getting all melodramatic on them—like, *How could you bear to give up your inheritance in the Junk Kingdom?*—when they hadn’t figured everything out yet.

It was a shame that not wanting to tell Dad something also meant they couldn’t tell Mom.

“Oh, um, who knows what could happen?” Nevaeh said faintly.

Mom shook her head, sending her wiry blondish-brown hair swinging out in a puff. Nevaeh knew Mom wasn’t disagreeing, just trying to stay awake.

“Interesting cases, let’s see . . .” Mom murmured.

They made it the rest of the way on Mom’s description of a single case: a teenager who’d somehow managed to break his leg in three places while rolling his four-wheeler. Nevaeh only had to ask, “Was it his femur or . . . what are the other bones in the leg called?” and Mom kept talking and talking and talking.

Then they were pulling into the gravel driveway of Steve’s Self-Storage. Row upon row of orange doors glowed in the early morning sunlight.

“Is it building one, two, or three?” Mom asked. “I’ll drive you around.”

“Oh, this is close enough,” Nevaeh said. “Just drop us here, so you can go straight home and get some sleep.”

Mom gave another jaw-cracking yawn.

“Sounds good,” she said. “Seems like I’m even more tired than usual—maybe I’m getting too old for these overnight shifts.”

Nevaeh got out. But then she had to reach back into the car and tap Colin on the shoulder.

“We’re here!” she shouted.

“Oh, um, er, thanks for the ride, Mrs. Greevey,” Colin mumbled. Nevaeh had to open the door for him, too. He was acting as scrambled and groggy as Mom. At least Mom didn’t seem to notice. She just blinked sleepily, not even paying attention when Nevaeh slammed both car doors once Colin was out.

Nevaeh leaned back in the open window.

“Yeah, thanks, Mom,” she said. “Now, go home and get some sleep!”

“Good idea,” Mom said.

Nevaeh only watched to make sure that Mom backed out and sped away. Then she took Colin’s arm and led him toward the first self-storage building.

“We’re so early, Steve hasn’t even arrived yet,” Nevaeh crowed, passing the dark office. “And if I remember the numbering system right, thirty-two’s at the back of the building, so we won’t have to see him at all. We can just get what we’re here for and go . . .”

“‘Kay,” Colin mumbled.

Nevaeh stopped and looked directly at him. Out of the car, in the bright sunlight, he looked even paler—and even more like he’d spent the whole summer hanging out in attics and basements.

“You’re not going to faint, are you?” Nevaeh asked. “If you’re going to be sick, I’ll call Mom to come back—she got paramedic training before she became an X-ray tech, you know.”

“Let’s just get this over with,” Colin said.

He seemed to be gritting his teeth. He stepped gingerly, as if he had to consciously think, *Put your right foot in front of your left foot. Now put your left foot in front of your right foot. Now do that again. . . .*

Nevaeh decided not to comment. But she kept her hand on his arm, just in case.

The gravel crunched beneath their feet. It was so early that, once the sound of Mom’s car engine faded away, there were long gaps between other cars or trucks driving by. Only cornfields lay behind Steve’s Self-Storage, so there wasn’t much birdsong to listen to, either. It was so early and so quiet that Nevaeh felt like the silence itself was buzzing in her ears.

They went around to the back of the building. Nevaeh glanced around for security cameras. That globe by the nearest light fixture—that was one, wasn’t it?

“You don’t want Steve seeing what we find, do you?” she asked Colin. “I’m thinking: we open the door and step in and shut the door again before we start opening boxes or anything—I mean, I’m guessing there are going to be boxes. . . . I don’t think there are security cameras in the units themselves, just outside.”

“Nevaeh,” Colin said quietly. “Don’t.”

Nevaeh was pretty sure he meant, *Don’t give me anything else to worry about. Don’t make this any harder than it already is.*

He pressed something into her hand—the key.

Nevaeh wanted to joke, *The last time someone trusted me to open a storage unit, everything went wrong, remember?* But she glanced again at Colin’s deathly white face, and kept her mouth shut.

They reached unit 32, its orange garage door indistinguishable from the doors around it.

Nevaeh gripped the padlock in her left hand—and immediately thought, *Oops, shouldn’t have done that. What if we needed to dust for fingerprints?*

Well, too late for that. She just hoped fingerprinting wasn’t necessary.

She shoved the key into the lock and it turned easily, not like the last time. She had a flash of remembering the last time she’d opened a storage unit, which had been her first official day working for her dad. Her family had been clustered around her, Dad and all her brothers and Prilla, everyone so excited at the prospect of all the valuable antiques they thought they were about to see—and then so crestfallen, when the storage unit turned out to be empty.

Or, actually, only nearly empty.

Nevaeh took a deep breath and pulled down on the padlock. She yanked back the metal bar holding the door in place and reached down to grip the handle to raise the door.

“One, two . . . three!” She grunted as she lifted, because she was way too much like her dad to do something this momentous in silence.

And then the door was all the way up, jerking back and forth at the end, because she’d evidently yanked a little too hard. But now Nevaeh could see past the door. And . . . this was like the total reverse of her last experience. This storage unit wasn’t empty—it was full. Boxes were piled one on top of the other before her and Colin, the wall of boxes stretching from side to side and all the way up to the ceiling.

And then the first box fell, toppling straight toward Nevaeh.

5

Surprises

Colin's brain couldn't keep up.

He was still bracing himself—*You're going to be okay with whatever you see. This isn't really going to matter. Your mom loves you, even if your dad never did. Nevaeh's going to help, no matter what. . . .*

He was still *preparing* himself and Nevaeh already had the door open; she was already rushing forward to catch the boxes that had started tumbling down, one after the other. In addition to all her other good traits, she was also apparently amazingly strong after her summer of carrying boxes. Because she managed to catch the first box, and then the second. She lifted them high and then . . . she dropped them and kicked them out of the way.

"Colin," she said, her voice heavy with distress. "These boxes are empty. There's nothing in them. They're just . . . ohhhh."

She was craning her neck, peering past the section of boxes where the most had toppled. They'd left a peephole.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Nevaeh repeated, her voice soaring higher. "Colin, you've got to see this!"

She started yanking boxes out of the way, giving him a clear view of what lay beyond, deeper in the storage unit.

"Is this . . . real?" Colin gasped.

What he saw wasn't laid out like a normal storage area, the type of place people tucked boxes and bins they didn't know what to do with. Spending his summer in attics and basements, he'd seen all sorts of haphazardly stuffed shelves, all sorts of teetering piles of bags, constantly threatening to slide out of order.

The space before him now looked much more planned than that, much more organized. It was like walking into a room in someone's house.

A well-decorated room.

A well-decorated room for a baby.

A colorful rug with the happy little faces of bunnies and puppies and kittens stretched across the floor of the storage unit, hiding the ugly, bland concrete. At one corner of the rug, a wooden crib stood beneath a wall hanging with the same bunnies and puppies and kittens dancing through the alphabet. A regal rocking chair beside the crib held an array of picture books—as if just waiting for someone to sit down and read a bedtime story to a beloved child. A nightstand, a lamp, a bookshelf, and a changing table lay just beyond, all arranged as if an interior decorator had determined the best placement for each one. Red, blue, and green wooden blocks tumbled just as artfully across the rug, as if a child had just finished playing—a child who somehow knew to leave his toys in a way that could be photographed for a home-design website. A stuffed giraffe leaned over the blocks, as if the giraffe had been playing with the child, too.

Something about the giraffe jolted Colin's memory. He narrowed his eyes, glancing at the stuffed lion, tiger, bear, elephant, koala, zebra, and other animals sprawled along the bookshelf and changing table.

"I think, I think—maybe I saw those toys in a picture once?" Colin muttered. "From when I was a baby?"

"Do you think *all* of this was yours when you were a baby?" Nevaeh asked, sounding just as stunned as Colin felt.

She stepped onto the rug and spun around, spreading her arms to indicate the full scene.

"Maybe?" Colin said. "I don't remember, and Mom didn't keep many pictures, but . . . yeah. I think this is all familiar. I think this was all mine."

Gingerly, Nevaeh inched toward the nightstand. She picked up something from beside the lamp. A sippy cup, maybe? But one that was shiny and silver and gleaming in the morning light, not one that was ordinary plastic.

Nevaeh held the silver cup high in the air, studying it carefully.

"Then, Colin . . . oh, Colin. When you were a baby . . . was your family super rich?"

6

The Voice in Nevaeh's Ear

"I don't know," Colin said. "Do you mean, was my father super rich? I don't know anything about him, remember?"

I asked the wrong question, Nevaeh thought. I shouldn't have said that.

How could she have made this about money?

It was just that she was her father's daughter, and she'd been working with Dad all summer. She could see the room the way her dad would see it; she could all but hear his voice in her ear, *Look at that cup! It's not even stainless steel, but real silver! And I don't mean silver-plated! Someone paid a pretty penny for that! And look at the furniture—that's high-end! And the art on the walls—wanna bet some of it's original and one of a kind? I could make a fortune, selling this stuff!*

She turned the cup around and saw that it was engraved with frilly letters: *Colin's First Cup*.

She was pretty sure a personalized engraving would hurt the resale value of a silver cup. And who would bother paying for the extra engraved words "first cup" instead of just a first name? Or initials?

But it was proof.

"This *is* yours!" she crowed to Colin. "We know for sure now!"

She took it to Colin to show him, and he immediately shoved it away. The cup fell from Nevaeh's grasp, making a muffled thud on the rug.

"Who cares if he was rich?" Colin snarled. "Who cares about money or furniture or, or, whatever else he bought me when I was a baby? He never came to see me after Mom and I left!"

Colin kicked the bottom box of one of the stacks still standing at the entrance to the storage unit. That box shot out toward the gravel parking lot, and the four above it slammed down onto Colin.

Colin crumpled onto the floor and buried his face in his hands.

Nevaeh scrambled closer. She shoved yet another empty box out of the way and crouched down beside him. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“We can put this all back the way it was,” she said. “We can shut the door and leave it behind. We can pretend this never happened. You can throw away the key.”

Nevaeh felt Colin’s shoulders tremble. Beneath her arm, she felt him draw in a ragged breath. That felt way too intimate, like she’d invaded his privacy. Like it wasn’t fair that she knew how much all this hurt him.

She drew her arm back.

“What do you want to do?” she asked. Her voice came out small and tight, practically a whisper.

Colin lifted his face from his hands. Nevaeh was surprised that it wasn’t tear streaked. His eyes weren’t even red.

They were fierce. Burning.

“I’m *not* throwing away the key,” he said. “I can’t pretend this didn’t happen. I’m going to look through everything in this storage unit. I’m going to figure out why this is here and who sent me the key and . . . and if my dad really did want me to have this. And, if he cared at all, why he didn’t contact me a long time ago. Before . . . before he died . . .”

Colin’s voice wavered at the end, tapering off into a raw whisper of his own.

“We’re going to look through everything,” Nevaeh countered. “We’re going to figure everything out.”

Colin’s face hardened, as if to say, *But you don’t understand. You can’t understand. Because you’re not me.* But the only other word he spoke was a muttered, “Okay.”

Tentatively, Nevaeh began lifting the tumbled boxes from beside Colin. She looked in each one before restacking them along the wall. Somehow it felt like this was all she could do right now.

Choosing what to investigate in the rest of the room was up to Colin.

But the boxes were just as dull as she’d expected.

“Empty,” she murmured. “Empty. Empty . . . it looks like these really were just here to block anyone from seeing inside. Or maybe whoever set this unit up didn’t trust it to be airtight and thought the boxes would help

keep out dirt or rain. Anyhow, I've checked every one of them now, and . . . nothing."

Colin didn't answer. But he stood up, as if Nevaeh moving the boxes had released him. He slowly walked deeper into the storage unit, toward the crib and the bookshelf and the rocking chair. He was like someone in a trance. Colin had pretty much become Nevaeh's best friend over the course of the summer, but he seemed like a stranger now. It was because of that one word: "okay." It had sounded like it meant the exact opposite: *No, that isn't okay. Nothing about this is okay. You aren't a part of this.*

She felt like she might need his permission to step onto the rug again.

Maybe she shouldn't even be here?

Colin was over by the crib now, reaching down.

"Oh!" he gasped.

Nevaeh rushed to his side.

A brightly colored blanket draped over the side of the crib had previously hidden everything behind it from her view. But now she saw that Colin had picked up a thick book from the luxurious-looking cream-colored sheet covering the crib mattress. No, not a book, exactly—a photo album. One of the old-fashioned kinds, with a thick, embossed cover and stiff, high-quality paper. And actual printed-out pictures.

Nobody had ordered this online from Shutterfly, after uploading pictures taken on a phone. They'd hired a professional photographer. They'd asked for the most expensive package of everything.

Nevaeh was sure of it.

She peeked over Colin's shoulder as he turned the pages slowly. Each picture featured a baby with just the beginnings of dark, curly hair. There he was nestled in blankets, his eyes closed, his tiny newborn face peaceful. There he was, cuddled against a woman's shoulder, both their faces hidden, but everything about them showing in the way her hand lovingly cradled his back. There the baby was again, nose to nose with a woman in the same peach-colored blouse. This woman also had dark, curly hair and a wide-open, trusting expression on her face. She looked so impossibly young that it took Nevaeh a moment to realize: *this was Colin's mom.*

Colin turned the page, and the next picture showed the same baby and the same woman alongside a man.

The man was tall, towering over baby Colin and his mom. He also had dark hair and dark eyes—Nevaeh had always thought Colin looked like his

mom, but he looked just as much like his dad. And Colin had his father's height. Only, this man sat up straight, seeming so certain about his right to take up space. Colin usually slumped. This man also had his long arms stretched protectively around the mother and baby. He had one hand lovingly placed on the mother's arm, the other on the baby's back. His head tilted down so his face was half-hidden, but what showed on his face was nothing but joy. It looked like a sweet, private family moment, as if none of them were aware of the photographer.

The words slipped out of Nevaeh's mouth before she had a chance to think: "It looks like he did love you, after all."

Colin dropped the photo album.

"Pictures can lie," he growled. "People can pretend all sorts of things." He waved an arm wildly, the gesture taking in the entire storage area. "This is staged. Can't you feel how fake it is?"

"But was it real twelve years ago?" Nevaeh asked.

Colin winced. Still, he reached for the photo album again. His hands shook, and he fumbled the heavy book, letting the back cover flop downward.

Something silver slid out and clinked against the rails of the crib.

Nevaeh reached out to grab whatever it was before it slipped down between the rails and the crib mattress or fell completely to the floor. She felt smooth, rounded metal with her thumb and biting metal teeth against her pinky finger. And then she lifted her hand high in the air, to show Colin.

"It's another key!" she exclaimed. "Why's there another key?"

"Because someone hates me," Colin muttered. "They're torturing me."

Nevaeh let the key dangle from the small, beaded chain it was attached to. The key swayed back and forth, as if she were trying to hypnotize Colin.

"Or they're sending you on a scavenger hunt," she countered. "Colin, what if they're leading you to some big treasure?"

7

The Phone Call

“If someone wants to give me a treasure, they can just hand it over now,” Colin growled. “I don’t need a treasure hunt.” He raised his voice, in case someone had stalked them to the storage unit or had some sort of motion-detector recording device set up nearby. “Do you hear me? I don’t want a treasure hunt! I’m not in the mood to solve a bunch of stupid clues!”

Nevaeh reached out, like she was going to pat his arm. But Colin glared, and she drew back her hand.

Colin stumbled over to the rocking chair and sank down into it.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m not mad at *you*. This is just . . . a lot.”

Nevaeh had the key in the palm of her hand again. She examined it closely, poking at the chain.

“There’s a little paper label,” she said. “It says . . . well, it’s hard to read, but . . . does Schenley Bridge mean anything to you?”

“Nothing,” Colin said flatly.

Nevaeh dropped the key into his hand and yanked out her phone. She typed quickly, then reported, “It’s a bridge in Pittsburgh. Did your dad want you to have an entire bridge? Oh, wait. I guess this is one of those bridges where couples leave love locks. . . .”

Nevaeh tilted her phone so he could see a picture of dozens of locks on a chain-link fence. Many of the locks were in the shape of a heart. Some of them seemed to be inscribed with names and dates: “Alicia and John, 5-14-15”; “Ji-yoon and Stu, 3-4-16” . . .

“Do you think your parents left a lock there?” Nevaeh asked. “Were they ever in Pittsburgh?”

Colin’s stomach churned.

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “But who cares? I know they were in love enough to get married—or thought they were in love enough to get married. But they fell out of love. Mom has hated my father ever since, since . . .”

There was the gaping hole again, the information he didn’t know.

Colin had no idea what had made his parents fall out of love. Or what made his mother hate his dad. Or what made her say he was such a terrible person that Colin was better off not knowing anything about him.

Colin resisted the temptation to stand back up and gaze again at the picture of his dad with his arms around Mom and baby Colin. The picture where everything about his father’s posture seemed to say, *I will take care of both of you always. I will protect you from everything bad in the world. I love you.*

Colin almost gagged.

Ugh, he thought. *Did that picture fool me? Do I actually believe it might be real?*

Nevaeh was still peering intently at her phone screen.

“It looks like some of these locks are big enough that they could have some sort of message tucked inside,” she said. “Or, who knows? Maybe another key?”

“We can’t go to Pittsburgh!” Colin protested. “It’s, like, a million miles away! In a completely different state! Even you can’t scam your mom into driving us there!”

“Well, maybe not Mom, but . . . I think there’s some college there that Prilla and Roddy want to visit. It’s got a good physics program *and* a good theater program? And it’s got a funny name—something like watermelon. Carnation-Watermelon University, maybe?” Nevaeh was still tapping away at her phone. “Pittsburgh is about two hundred miles away. We could get there in just over three hours. Hmm . . .”

“You . . . you really are going to work this out,” Colin said incredulously. “You’re going to figure out how to get us to *Pittsburgh*.”

Nevaeh lowered her phone.

“Only if you want to go,” she said.

Colin was suddenly aware of how still and close the air was in the storage unit. Now that the sun was fully up outside, it was getting hotter and hotter.

He laughed, stalling for time.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” he said. “What if that key fit a lock on a bridge in, like, Hawaii? You’d figure out a way to get us there, too, wouldn’t you?”

“Scheming—it’s my gift,” Nevaeh said, as if she was trying to sound modest. She gave a fake bow. “I *don’t* think I could get us to Hawaii, though. Because: planes. Too spendy. But there are plenty of places I could convince Prilla or one of my brothers to *drive* us to. Just thinking about the colleges Prilla and Roddy want to check out . . . the University of Chicago and Northwestern and MIT are on their lists, too. Oh, and Vanderbilt in Nashville. So Pittsburgh and Carnation-Watermelon University is just the *start* to the places I could get us to.”

Colin dug his phone out now, too. He giggled.

“It’s *Carnegie* Mellon University,” he told Nevaeh. “Not anything about carnations or watermelon.”

“Whatever,” Nevaeh said, not seeming embarrassed at all. She waved away the mistake. “You figured out what I meant.” She nudged his arm. “So, want me to start Operation Go to Pittsburgh? Just say the word!”

Somehow, by making him laugh, Nevaeh had changed the whole mood of the room.

Colin did want to go to Pittsburgh.

He did want to find out what this new key unlocked.

He did want to understand everything about his father, even if it was bad.

Nevaeh held up her phone as if she already knew his answer. As if she was prepared to send a text immediately.

But then her phone rang.

Nevaeh glanced at the screen, rolled her eyes, and muttered, “No, Mom, I don’t have time to talk right now. And weren’t you going straight home to sleep?”

But she flicked her finger across the screen and lifted the phone toward her ear.

“Hey, Mom, we don’t need another ride yet. We’ll call somebody else when we do. I promise we won’t wake you up!”

Colin was only about a foot away from Nevaeh, and she always had her volume turned up high. So he could hear Nevaeh’s mother’s voice through the phone. But it came across as scratchy and dim—not like Nevaeh’s confident, competent mother at all.

“Oh, sorry, meant to call . . . Must have hit redial. . . .”

Colin could tell by Nevaeh’s puzzled expression that her mother’s words didn’t make sense to her, either.

“Mom, what are you talking about?” Nevaeh demanded. “Who were you trying to call?”

“I . . . wrecked. Hit . . .” Nevaeh’s mom slurred her words together, so Colin could barely understand. “Call . . . 911. Call your dad. . . .”

“Mom, what happened? Where are you? Mom? Mom?”

There was no answer.

8

Nevaeh, Wrecked

“Mom? Mom? Mom? Are you there?”

Nevaeh heard her own voice soaring higher and higher, sounding more and more worried. Her ears roared. Was Mom answering, and Nevaeh just couldn’t hear her over her own panic?

Nevaeh’s vision kept coming in and out, too. Dimly, she saw Colin stand up and hold out his phone.

“She said to call 911,” Colin said. “Want me to do that?”

Nevaeh yanked the phone from his hand. She couldn’t hang up on her mother, even if she wasn’t answering. But she also couldn’t wait for Colin.

“Mom?” she wailed again into her own phone, even as she stabbed her finger against the screen of Colin’s, hitting three numbers: 9-1-1.

The dispatcher’s voice came instantly, full of urgency: “What is your emergency?”

“Car wreck. My mom . . .” Nevaeh couldn’t seem to get the words out.

“She’s either on Uhrlin Road or on the way from Steve’s Self-Storage to where the Greeveys live,” Colin leaned in to add. “Out by where the junkyard used to be.”

“Can you describe any landmarks near where the accident happened?” the dispatcher added. “Can you tell me the condition of everyone in the car? Were there any other cars involved?”

“I don’t know!” Nevaeh wailed. “I’m not there!”

Once again, Colin filled in: “Nevaeh’s mom was alone in the car. But she just called and said she had an accident and now she’s not talking. . . .” He turned to shout toward Nevaeh’s phone, “Mrs. Greevey? Mrs. Greevey? Can you tell us where you are?”

Nevaeh’s phone stayed silent.

“We’re sending someone now,” the dispatcher said. “What’s your mother’s first name?”

Mommy, Nevaeh thought, and her throat clogged up so badly, she couldn’t speak. Fortunately Colin darted in to say, “Pam. Her name’s Pam Greevey. Or maybe it’s actually Pamela?”

Somehow that one word—Pamela—made Nevaeh’s eyes flood with tears. Nobody ever called Mom “Pamela.” She wasn’t that formal.

Colin eased his phone out of Nevaeh’s hand. He was giving other details to the dispatcher: his name and Nevaeh’s. His phone number. He gave a guess at Nevaeh’s mother’s age: “Fortysomething? Fifty?” And then he was asking Nevaeh a question: “Nevaeh, does your mom have any health issues that the EMTs should know about? Any allergies?”

“No . . . no . . . ,” Nevaeh managed to say.

Since her voice worked, after all, Nevaeh tried again with her own phone: “Mom? Mom? Please answer! Please tell me you’re okay!”

Silence.

And then, off in the distance, Nevaeh heard a siren. No—multiple sirens.

Colin must have hung up from talking with the dispatcher, because now he held his phone out to her again.

“You want to call your dad on my phone?” he asked. “So you can keep the phone call to your mom open?”

“I can’t call Dad until Mom answers,” Nevaeh said. “Because he’ll think . . . He’ll think . . .”

He’ll think the worst. Like . . . she might be dead.

Nevaeh moaned and slumped down to the chair Colin had just left. She screamed into her phone, “Mom, Mom, Mom—answer!”

Nothing.

Colin’s dad died. Sometimes parents do. Why his and not mine?

She knew the answer to that. Or what the answer should be. Colin’s dad was a terrible person, and he’d never been a true father. Or, at least, not since Colin was a baby. But Nevaeh’s mom was the *best*. She was always there for Nevaeh. And for Prilla, Roddy, Dalton, Axel, and Dad.

Nevaeh’s mom couldn’t die. It just couldn’t be.

But *nothing* bad should ever happen to Nevaeh’s mom.

Or anyone in Nevaeh’s family.

It’s different, my family and Colin’s. We deserve . . . we deserve . . .

Colin was tugging on her arm.

"Come on," he said. "I just called my mom. She's coming to pick us up. We've got to get out of here. I told her we'd be waiting by the road."

When had Colin had time to call his mom? How could Nevaeh have not even heard him?

Colin pulled Nevaeh out of the storage unit. He pulled the garage door down behind them and replaced the lock. Nevaeh could do nothing but stumble after him, and whimper into her phone, "Mom? Mom?"

And then the siren sound coming from the phone was louder than the sirens Nevaeh could hear off in the distance.

Then the sirens stopped.

"Mrs. Greevey?" she heard a woman's voice calling distantly through the phone. "Can you hear us?"

"Yes . . ." It was Mom's voice, muffled and remote.

But she was alive.

"Mom! Why didn't you answer sooner?" Nevaeh shouted.

The EMT's voice came again, as if Nevaeh hadn't even spoken, "Well, Mrs. Greevey, we're going to get you out of there, but it may take a while. Looks like you're lucky your airbags worked."

"Kept me alive, but might have broken a few bones . . ." Mom moaned.

"Mom! Which bones?" Nevaeh cried. "Are you really okay?"

Again, no one answered.

"Nevaeh, I don't think she can hear you," Colin said. "That's why she wasn't answering. Maybe she dropped the phone. Or thought she was hanging up but turned off the speaker instead."

"She's done that before!" Nevaeh agreed.

And somehow, of all things, that was what made her suddenly double over. She had to lean against the side of the storage unit building. The tears that had welled up in her eyes began sliding down her cheeks.

Colin put his arm around her shoulders.

"It's okay," he said. "Everything's going to be okay."

"You don't know that for sure!" Nevaeh wailed.

"I do," Colin said. "It will."

"But . . . but . . . but . . ."

Nevaeh couldn't even speak through her tears. But the words wrapped themselves around her brain: *If Mom isn't okay . . .*

. . . it's all my fault.

9

Colin, Wrecked

Colin's mom put down her phone.

"Broken left wrist," she said. "Broken right ankle. Two broken ribs. Possible concussion. Poor Pam."

Colin almost dropped the box of junk he'd been carrying. Even after the accident, they were working today, him and his mom and Nevaeh and all Nevaeh's siblings. Everyone had agreed that this was the best way to help while Nevaeh's dad waited at the hospital.

"But she's going to be okay, right, Mom?" Colin asked.

"Yes, those are all things she can heal from," Mom said. "Eventually. But she's going to need surgery on that ankle and wrist." She shook her head sorrowfully and repeated, "Poor Pam. And—poor Lloyd. He's got to feel terrible for asking Pam to drive you and Nevaeh this morning. Making her stay up even longer after she had three night shifts in a row."

Colin gulped and started coughing. It probably sounded to Mom as though he was reacting to the dust that lay everywhere in the old house they were cleaning out with the Greeveys. But he wasn't.

"Mom, it wasn't Mr. Greevey who—"

Behind his mom, he could see Nevaeh violently shaking her head. She locked eyes with him, and he could almost see her thinking, *Don't tell. You can't tell.*

Nevaeh's face still looked unnaturally pale. Her eyes were red, and she still had tear marks down her cheeks that she hadn't washed away. Her hair stuck up as though she'd forgotten to comb it.

Colin had seen Nevaeh drenched in sweat after working in an unair-conditioned attic in ninety-degree heat. He'd seen her carry boxes covered in mold and mildew and mouse droppings without even flinching. He'd

seen her with dirt or rust streaked across her cheeks when she shoved a strand of hair back without scrubbing her hands first. But he'd never before seen her look this unkempt, this off-kilter.

Up until that morning when she'd gotten the phone call from her mom, Colin would have sworn that Nevaeh could handle any situation with absolute calm.

Even that time a few weeks ago when she'd gotten a little spooked by the thought of ghosts in their friend Ree's attic—which was above a funeral home, and really *might* have been haunted—Nevaeh had just calmly made up a story about getting a text and needing to leave.

In the confusion this morning, Colin and Nevaeh had just let Mom assume that they'd been on some errand for Nevaeh's dad. They hadn't exactly lied, but . . .

Yeah, we pretty much did lie, Colin thought guiltily. *Just because I was trying to find out more about my dad. Just because . . .*

It felt like this was something else to be mad at his father about.

But he still wanted to know about his father. Regardless.

"Mom—" he tried again.

But Mom was back on her phone, typing this time. She hadn't even heard him.

"Okay, we're going to call in the cavalry here," she muttered. "Pam Greevey has helped pretty much everyone in Groveview at one time or another, so it's time for Groveview to help her. Nevaeh, do you know if your dad has notified your church yet? And your mom was in the PTO at your school, right? All the other PTO parents would be willing to sign up to bring food to your family, wouldn't they?"

"We don't need anyone bringing us food," Nevaeh protested. "Prilla and I know how to cook. So do Dad and Axel and Dalton."

Colin waited for Nevaeh to laugh about how her brother Roddy *didn't* know how to cook. He was brilliant when it came to wild scientific theories that no one else could understand. But one of the many Greevey family jokes was that Roddy was so easily distracted that he couldn't even make toast without burning it. Or starting a fire.

But Nevaeh only bit her lip and seemed to turn another shade paler.

"Colin and I know how to cook, too," Mom said. "But that casserole and salad your mom made me the day—well, you know, that awful day—that was exactly what we needed. I've made plenty of mistakes in my life,

but I've learned—you don't turn down help when people offer it sincerely. And people will offer it right and left for your parents."

"*That awful day*," Colin thought.

Why wouldn't Mom just come out and say, *The day Colin's dad died*? And then Colin could say, *Speaking of Dad* . . .

He shot another glance at Nevaeh's face. She was so pale now, she looked like she might pass out.

"Nevaeh, why don't you sit down?" he asked.

Nevaeh shook her head stubbornly.

"I'm not even close to being done clearing out these cabinets," she said, gesturing toward the large kitchen behind her. "There's no time to take a break."

"But you've made amazing progress," Mom said gently, finally glancing up from her phone. "Your dad would be proud of how much we've done today. In spite of everything. I know both your parents are proud of raising all you kids to be such hard workers."

She tucked her phone back into her pocket and headed toward the kitchen to help Nevaeh. On the way, she detoured to ruffle Colin's hair.

Was it an "I'm proud of you, too, Colin" hair rustling? Or did it mean "Well, not everyone can work as hard as those Greeveys, but I love you anyway, Colin"?

And what would my dad have been proud of me for, if he'd ever known me?

Colin thought again about how eerie it had been to see the completely assembled baby's room in the storage unit. And to see the baby picture of him with both his parents—*both* of them so attentive, so loving. Or the key in the shoebox left on his doorstep and the key in the crib. Or the green Post-it Note on the mysterious package, claiming, *Your father wanted you to have this*.

Was that true? Or just a . . . mirage? Who could possibly have sent me that note and that key?

None of it made sense. And after the horrible phone call from Nevaeh's mom, everything else from that morning felt like it could have been just a dream—or a nightmare. He was lucky Nevaeh had been with him, too, seeing everything he saw, or else he would have had trouble believing any of it was real.

He glanced again toward Nevaeh. She'd refused to sit down, but she hadn't exactly gone back to work. She was just standing frozen in front of the open kitchen cabinet.

She looked completely stymied.

And, Colin thought, if Nevaeh is stymied . . .

So was he.

10

Nevaeh, Finding Out More

I just need to talk to Mom, Nevaeh thought, crammed in between Prilla and Roddy in the truck on the way home. *I just need to tell her . . .*

What? What could Nevaeh say to fix this? “I’m sorry” wasn’t enough. “I didn’t mean for you to get hurt” didn’t cut it, either. Nevaeh really wanted to spill everything, starting with the predawn phone call from Colin, and explaining how much he needed her help. And maybe even asking what Mom knew about Colin’s dad, that she could tell him even if Colin’s own mom wouldn’t talk about his father.

But Colin wouldn’t want her to say all that. It would feel like a betrayal.

I’ll wing it, Nevaeh thought. *As soon as I see Mom, I’ll know what to say.*

Nevaeh started heading for the house as soon as they got home and everyone spilled out of the truck. But Prilla immediately called her back.

“Whoa—did you forget we have to unload all of the day’s haul into the barn?” Prilla asked.

“We can’t just leave it sitting out when there’s a ninety percent chance of rain overnight,” Roddy backed her up.

Nevaeh’s oldest brother, Axel, scrambled out of their second truck and joined in, “Yeah, we need some of this old junk furniture to turn out to secretly be some long-lost valuable antiques, if we’re ever going to be able to pay Mom’s medical bills.”

“Or buy her a new car,” Nevaeh’s other brother, Dalton, added grimly.

Bills! Nevaeh thought. She’d spent the whole day fretting about Mom’s broken bones and concussion and hadn’t thought even once about how

expensive the accident might be. It probably did cost a lot of money to have wrist and ankle surgery.

Guilt churned in her gut, but she turned around without a word and began dragging boxes out of the back of the truck. Only, she wasn't watching where she was going and nearly slammed into Prilla.

Prilla flipped her thick ponytail out of the way and steadied Nevaeh's shoulders.

"Hey—you okay?" Prilla asked.

Nevaeh realized that, normally, she would have had a sassy comeback to her brothers' and sister's lecture. Or at least a defiant, *Stop bossing me around! I know we have more work!*

Maybe I can just talk to Prilla, Nevaeh thought. Maybe I can tell her why Colin and I were at the storage unit this morning and ask her advice, and . . . that will be enough.

But Prilla was gazing at her with such love and concern. If Nevaeh confessed that she'd lied to Mom, and the accident was Nevaeh's fault, Prilla would never look at her the same way again.

"Just worried about Mom," Nevaeh mumbled instead.

"Aren't we all," Prilla said. "But, you know, bones heal. Everybody says Mom will be fine."

But do they really believe that, or is that just what they're saying?

Nevaeh didn't say that out loud. She just shrugged off Prilla's steadying hands and went back to work. She trudged back and forth between the truck and the barn again and again without meeting anybody else's gaze.

Nobody else said much, either.

Finally the work was done, and Nevaeh burst into the house. But Dad was standing in the doorway of her parents' bedroom.

"She's sleeping peacefully now, and none of you are going to make a sound louder than a whisper that might wake her up—got it?" he said almost menacingly.

Nevaeh's dad was not normally a menacing person. He was a big guy, yes, but usually in a "I'm as jolly as Santa Claus" kind of way, not a "you do not want to mess with me" way.

"Somebody better intercept whoever's coming down the lane, then," Axel said, peering out the window. "It looks like . . . some of the women from church? With casserole dishes?"

“Oh, please, let it be lasagna,” Dalton muttered. “Or I’d love a giant helping of baked spaghetti with meatballs. Please don’t let it be that brussels-sprouts-and-weird-grains dish that Mrs. Dingleheimer brings to all the potlucks.”

“We’ve been working all day,” Axel agreed. “We cannot live on brussels sprouts alone.”

Dad was already out the back door. He came back a little while later carrying a giant casserole dish that smelled vaguely cabbage-like.

“Who’s in the mood for brussels sprouts?” he asked.

“Sounds good!” Axel said.

“You know, I was just thinking I need more roughage in my diet,” Dalton said.

Nevaeh stared suspiciously at her two oldest brothers. Dalton winked at her.

Oh, right, they’re putting a good face on things for Dad, she thought.

It was a bad sign when even Dalton and Axel weren’t being snarky.

Nobody talked much at dinner. They cleaned out every last leaf and unidentifiable grain of the casserole—no one even suggested scraping it into the garbage. Afterward, Nevaeh went up to the room she shared with Prilla and sprawled across her bed. The brussels sprout casserole lay like a stone in her stomach, but she would have felt weighted down even if she’d eaten nothing.

My fault, my fault, my fault, she thought.

How did people ever get rid of guilt like this?

Having a church-lady casserole in her stomach—even an unpleasant church-lady casserole—reminded her: People prayed. They asked for forgiveness.

Oh, God, please, Nevaeh thought. *I’m so sorry.*

She didn’t feel much better.

Nevaeh’s parents had been taking her to church and Sunday school her whole life. A lot of the time, she’d been too busy playing with the other kids to listen much to the lessons. But it kind of seemed like the ministers and Sunday-school teachers were always saying there was a difference between tossing off a quick, easy prayer to God and sincerely seeking forgiveness.

Usually, it seemed, you also had to confess to the people you’d wronged.

You had to make things right, not just take the easy way out.

Nevaeh sighed.

And then her phone dinged with a text from Colin:

I know things are messed up right now, but . . . are you still going to ask Prilla and Roddy to take us to Pittsburgh?

Nevaeh stared at the black type on her phone until the words blurred together. How could he ask that? How could he be so clueless about what really mattered?

And who really matters, she thought. My mom. Not his dad.

Then she felt guilty about that, too. She typed back a quick answer:

Can't even think about that right now. Sorry

She couldn't lie still any longer, either. She got up and stomped down the stairs so loudly, she expected Dad to yell at her again. But he wasn't around. She tiptoed down the hallway to her parents' bedroom and hovered outside the door. She saw the way the fake gold finish was worn off the doorknob. And the bottom half of the wooden door still held scratches from a dog the family had owned when Axel and Dalton were little—before Mom had decreed, “With so many rug rats around, I can't deal with animals in the house, too!” Usually all the dents and scratches and chipped paint in the house annoyed Nevaeh—along with everything else that screamed, “Used!” “Secondhand!” “Other people's junk!” She longed for the clean, quiet perfection that Colin's mom seemed to maintain so easily at their house. But tonight the sight of the scratches and the worn finish brought a lump to Nevaeh's throat.

And the house was totally silent now—the exact silence Nevaeh thought she'd always longed for—and it felt utterly wrong.

Nevaeh gave the door before her a panicky little shove. It wasn't so much that she wanted to confess right now. It was more that she wanted Mom to assure her, *Don't worry. I'm going to heal and we'll find the money to pay for everything somehow. And everything will go back to normal. Before you know it, you'll be complaining about all the noise and the clutter and Dalton stealing cookies off your plate and Roddy “borrowing” your hair straightener for some weird science experiment and Dad just not listening. . . .*

The door swung open, ever so slightly. Through the crack between the door and the doorframe, Nevaeh could see her mother lying flat on the bed, her eyes shut, her arm in a sling, a giant bandage across her forehead.

Nevaeh took a step to the side, ready to shove the door the rest of the way open—ready to wake Mom up, even if Dad had said not to.

But Mom wasn't alone.

Dad was perched on the opposite side of the bed. While Nevaeh watched, he reached out and gently began stroking Mom's hair, smoothing it back from her face. Dad was not normally a gentle person—normally, he was loud and exuberant, his every gesture big and dramatic. He was basically a giant Energizer Bunny.

But now he sat so still, his only motion so small and subtle, his touch so soft against Mom's hair that she probably didn't even feel it. A single tear rolled down his cheek, but he seemed not to notice it. He began to whisper, "I was so scared today. If I'd lost you . . . I don't know what I would have done."

Nevaeh darted back away from the door. She pressed her back hard against the wall closest to the door hinges, out of sight. It felt like she'd witnessed something too private, too personal. This was almost as bad as if she'd seen her dad naked.

Dad was not supposed to be so . . . vulnerable. Dad—and Mom, too—were supposed to be able to take care of everything.

Dad was basically Superman. Before Mom went back to work, he'd been able to support a family of seven on the junk other people would just throw away.

Mom had always seemed like Superwoman, too, able to take care of a family of seven and work full-time and never ever actually need sleep. Oh, sure, she talked a lot about being sleepy after working a night shift, but . . .

But I never thought she'd fall asleep and drive off the road.

Didn't *that* let Nevaeh off the hook? She honestly hadn't thought it was possible that anything bad would happen from lying ever so slightly to Mom.

Was it still her fault if she hadn't known what could happen?

Inside her parents' bedroom, her dad's phone began ringing. He silenced it immediately, and then he must have tiptoed over near the door to answer. Nevaeh could hear him clearly, even though his voice was hushed.

"She's doing okay," he said, and Nevaeh could hear the fakeness in his tone, the way he was trying to sound cheerful but really wasn't. "Give her a couple weeks and she'll be good as new—better than new, maybe,

because she'll have titanium plates in her wrist and ankle, and mere mortals like us only have ordinary bone!"

Nevaeh couldn't hear the reply from whoever he was talking to, but it went on for a while. Then Dad said stiffly, "Really, we're fine. But I do appreciate everything you've done, Felicia."

Felicia! Nevaeh thought. Dad was talking to Colin's mom—the only Felicia any of the Greeveys knew.

Nevaeh held her breath, because what if Mrs. Creedmont complained, *Why did you tell Colin and Nevaeh they had to be at Steve's Self-Storage this morning?* And then it would all come out, that Nevaeh had lied to Mom and everything about the accident was Nevaeh's fault. Not Dad's. Not Mrs. Creedmont's.

Nevaeh reached for the doorknob, because it would be better to just confess now, before Dad and Mrs. Creedmont figured everything out and accused her.

But Dad's next words stopped her.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, there's no reason to cancel your Pittsburgh plans because of this," he said.

Pittsburgh plans? Nevaeh thought. *PITTSBURGH?*

How could Mrs. Creedmont have Pittsburgh plans when Nevaeh and Colin were also scheming to get to Pittsburgh because of the key they'd found in the storage unit this morning?

Had Colin given up on waiting for Nevaeh to get Prilla and Roddy to help, and just asked his mom to take him? And she'd agreed?

No, Dad said, "cancel." That means Mrs. Creedmont had these plans before the accident.

Why would Mrs. Creedmont want to go to Pittsburgh, too?

On the other side of the door, Dad was saying, "We can still have Colin stay with us that weekend. No problem."

Silence. Then Dad said in a startled tone, "Oh, I didn't think of that. I guess that could work. I'd have to ask Nevaeh first, but—"

The door opened, and Dad blinked at Nevaeh in surprise. Nevaeh took a step forward, trying to act like she'd been walking toward the door that very moment—not that she'd been eavesdropping.

But Dad didn't seem to notice or care.

"Hey," he said. "Want to go to Pittsburgh next weekend with Colin and his mom?"

11

Colin's Questions

Colin hunched over his phone, waiting for Nevaeh to text something besides, “Can’t even think about that right now. Sorry.” It was ridiculous, because he’d been sitting on his bed watching his phone screen for at least ten minutes, and nothing had happened. At some point he’d have to get up and do something for himself, instead of relying on Nevaeh.

And then three dots started bouncing up and down on the screen. Seconds later, a glorious new text appeared: **So you got your wish, and we’re going to Pittsburgh!**

Yes!

Colin threw his arms in the air like a runner who’d just won some big race. Then he typed back: **With Prilla? Or Roddy? Or both? How’d you manage that?**

Nevaeh’s reply was instantaneous—and confusing:

No, with your mom

Didn’t she tell you?

Colin felt a hot little rush of fury.

You told her about the key and the lock on the bridge??? he wrote back. And the storage unit??? Or did you tell your mom or dad, and they told my mom? I thought you knew this was secret!

Colin could have gone on accusing Nevaeh, but her reply stopped him: **I didn’t tell!** And then a second later: **Talk to your mom. Idk why she wants to go to Pittsburgh, but she already had it planned. Before this morning. Can’t be coincidence**

Nevaeh was never subtle. She went into all-caps mode next: **TALK TO YOUR MOM AND FIND OUT WHAT’S GOING ON!**

Colin groaned and dropped his phone on his bed. *Talk to your mom*—that was easy for Nevaeh to say. Her family never stopped talking. She'd blabbed practically every thought she'd ever had to her parents and brothers and sister ever since she was born. She just didn't understand what it was like in his house.

Something like guilt twinged in his gut. Nevaeh had always kept *his* secrets for him. She'd done that from the first day they'd met, when he'd been looking for a shoebox full of old letters, and she didn't even know why.

Colin *should* have texted back some sort of apology. But he needed to get up and confront his mom before he chickened out.

He stood and sneaked out of his bedroom, opening and closing his door as quietly as possible.

Mom was sitting at the kitchen table, her chin cupped in her hands, her head tilted toward her laptop. Mom was kind of a workaholic—Colin could remember times when he was a little kid awakened in the middle of the night by some nightmare, and he'd come out of his room to find Mom in this exact spot, typing invoices or spreadsheets. But even then, she always had perfect posture; even in the middle of the night she'd seemed efficient and productive and focused, typing endlessly and precisely without a single mistake.

Right now, she looked more like she was daydreaming.

"Mom," Colin said.

Immediately she snapped her laptop shut.

"Were you looking at something you don't want me to see?" Colin asked.

"Yeah, right—are you really that eager to look at tax forms?" Mom laughed.

Did he believe her? Who would daydream about tax forms?

"Nevaeh says you invited her to go to Pittsburgh with us," Colin said. "*I* didn't even know we were going. Why didn't you tell me? Does this have something to do with Dad? With him . . . dying?"

"Why would this have anything to do with your dad?" Mom asked. She swallowed hard, and Colin saw that he'd already messed up the conversation. He should have stuck to one question at a time. Easy ones first.

Mom's face was rigid, giving away nothing. "We've both worked hard this summer. Don't you think we deserve a little weekend getaway before you go back to school?"

"You always work hard," Colin said. The words came out sounding sulkier than he meant them to. "And we never go anywhere."

"You're older now, and . . ." Mom fiddled with the edge of her laptop, like she was debating flipping it open again. Mom wasn't the type to fidget. She seemed to notice Colin watching and threw up her hands in a gesture of defeat.

"All right," she said. "I missed Pittsburgh, and as long as your father was alive, it never felt right to go back."

"Back?" Colin said. "Is that where we used to live?" It felt ridiculous to him that he didn't even know that. A new thought occurred to him. "Was that where I was born?"

Because his mom never wanted to talk about his father, everything before the divorce seemed like a giant black hole.

How could he not even know where he was born?

"No, Pittsburgh was before that." Mom sounded like giving up that information was as painful as having teeth pulled. "Anyhow, I have some . . . paperwork . . . I need to deal with there. I was going to have you stay with the Greeveys while I was away, but it doesn't seem fair to burden them with anything else after Pam's accident. So we'll have Nevaeh come with us instead. And maybe Prilla will come, too, to babysit you and Nevaeh while I'm . . . busy."

"We don't need a babysitter!" Colin protested. "We're both twelve! Nevaeh and me—we've *been* babysitters!"

"Colin . . .," Mom said.

"What?" Colin challenged. "Tell me what's going on!"

Mom stood up.

"I think I need to go take a walk," she said. "I can't talk about this with you right now. I need to figure out how this is going to work. Sorry."

She gave an apologetic shrug and was out the door before Colin could say anything else.

He stared at the back of the door for a full minute before he thought of the right comeback: *But what about what I need?*

Before he could reconsider, he turned on his heel and ran back into his bedroom. He snatched up his phone from his bed and typed his father's

name. Nevaeh wasn't at his side this time. *Nobody* was with him. Still, he stabbed his finger against the screen without hesitation, starting a search. He held his breath as the first clumps of words appeared. But all of them were the wrong words, false matches. He scrolled down, further and further into connections that had nothing to do with him or his dad. He tried to refine his search:

Franklin Creedmont death

Frank Creedmont

Franklin Creedmont obituary

Franklin Creedmont son Colin

Franklin Creedmont survivor Colin

Franklin Creedmont ex-wife Felicia

Franklin Creedmont divorce Felicia

Finally he switched back into his chain of texts with Nevaeh and wrote:

What if my dad didn't even exist?

12

Nevaeh's Questions

Nevaeh balanced her phone on her knee and typed back to Colin: **Of course your dad existed! We saw his picture!**

Colin's reply came fast: **That could have been anyone. Could have been an actor my mom hired to pretend to be my dad**

Nevaeh typed the word "But" and left it there, the cursor blinking and blinking and blinking at her. What did she know about Colin's family? What could she say to help him when she felt so wrong about everything herself?

She erased the "But" and typed instead, **We should meet to talk about this. Library in 20 min?**

She lifted her head. She'd been staring at her phone longer than she'd thought. When she'd started texting back and forth with Colin, she'd been sitting on the couch in the family room alongside Dad, Prilla, and Roddy. Never mind that all of them had been staring at their phones—they'd been *together*. Now the other three had vanished.

She heard murmuring coming from the hallway down to Mom and Dad's room. She tiptoed over to the corner just as a burst of laughter came out of the room.

"No, Mom, seriously—you could say you're having Roddy or me job-shadow you for a few weeks, and make us do all the work anytime you need to pick something up with two hands," Prilla was saying.

"And I'm not such a butterfingers that I would drop *everything*," Roddy added. "It's statistically impossible for me to be that perfectly awful."

"He only drops half of the boxes I give him to carry," Dad teased.

“You know it’d be a HIPAA violation to let any of you help me, but I appreciate the thought.” This was Mom’s voice, sounding weak and groggy.

And pained.

“If nothing else, we can drive you everywhere, until you heal,” Prilla said. “And . . . until we get a new car.”

Nevaeh stopped in her tracks. She couldn’t go in and laugh with everyone else when Mom’s accident had been her fault.

And she couldn’t go in and ask for a ride to the library and pull Dad or Prilla or Roddy away from Mom.

She erased the words she’d typed to Colin and wrote instead, **Can you go somewhere private so we can FaceTime again?**

She backed away from the hallway to her parents’ room and tiptoed out of the house. She jumped down from the back porch and took off running for the barn.

Earlier that summer, the barn had felt like her secret hideaway. She’d gone there to read and puzzle over the fifty-year-old letters she and Colin had discovered together, on their way to solving a mystery that connected the present and the past. Just a few weeks ago, she’d huddled on one of the ancient couches stored in the barn and felt an almost supernatural link to a runaway boy who’d huddled in the same barn nearly a century earlier. Before tonight, every time she wove her way through the old furniture to the back of the barn, she’d felt like she was claiming her own space, setting herself apart from the rest of her family in a good way.

Tonight, it felt more like being cast out.

Only, she’d done it to herself.

Her phone began to vibrate before she got even halfway to the back of the barn. She lifted it so Colin could see something besides the dim blur of falling-apart couches as she rushed past them.

“You’re in your shed again, huh?” she asked, recognizing the neatly coiled hose and perfectly spaced gardening tools on the wooden wall behind him on the phone screen.

Colin made a face.

“Mom’s out for a walk, but if she comes back . . . I don’t want her overhearing. Because . . . Nevaeh, I finally googled my dad’s name.”

“By yourself?” Nevaeh asked. Somehow the words came out as an accusation. Like, *How dare you not need my help!* She cleared her throat.

“I mean, good for you!”

“Yeah, but it didn’t matter.” Colin’s scowl was epic. “It’s like Google doesn’t think there was ever anyone named ‘Franklin Creedmont’ in the whole world.”

Nevaeh decided she’d gone quite far enough into the dim back of the barn. She plopped down on a scratchy sofa that might have been in the barn longer than Nevaeh had been alive.

“But you *know* your dad existed,” she argued. “Because *you* exist. It’s not just that you saw that picture. . . . Haven’t you ever seen your birth certificate? Or—I know! Didn’t you say your mom showed you the, uh, divorce decree? Back in June when she actually, um, did tell you some things about your dad?”

Nevaeh wasn’t sure if it was okay to bring that up. Colin’s mom had talked about his dad only *after* Nevaeh and Colin had gotten into a huge fight. And the fight had been Nevaeh’s fault.

Nevaeh didn’t want to remind Colin that she’d failed him, too.

“Yeah, I saw one paragraph of the divorce decree on my mom’s computer screen,” Colin said bitterly. “The paragraph where Dad gave away his right to ever see me again. And Mom just showed me that to prove that Dad was a terrible person. It’s not like I saw his signature or . . .”

Nevaeh wanted to say, *Then maybe he didn’t sign it! Maybe that wasn’t even the real divorce decree! Maybe your mom lied, and your dad’s been searching for you for the past twelve years!*

But how would it help Colin to suggest his mom, not his dad, was the terrible one?

Anyway, Nevaeh *liked* Mrs. Creedmont. She didn’t want to think anything bad about Colin’s mom, either.

“Maybe your dad changed his name,” Nevaeh said instead. “Maybe he was ‘Franklin Creedmont’ when your parents were married, and then for some reason he wanted a different identity.”

“Maybe he did it so I’d never find him,” Colin growled.

“But he didn’t know we’d be the Mystery Solvers,” Nevaeh said, with an enthusiasm she didn’t quite feel.

“Mystery Solvers” was the name she and Colin had come up with for the business they’d started earlier that summer, after figuring out the

hidden letters they'd discovered back in June. They'd been so proud of their triumphs, so sure they could help lots of other people.

But now it sounded like something little kids would make up. Their friend Ree had an eight-year-old sister who was constantly changing her identity—in the short time they'd known her, she'd been “Melanie the Genius,” “Melanie the Ballerina,” and “Melanie the Bug Collector.”

It sounded just as childish for Colin and Nevaeh to say they were Mystery Solvers.

“What if this is the mystery we can't solve?” Colin asked. His face seemed to tremble on the phone screen, and Nevaeh couldn't tell if he was shaking the phone, or if he was about to cry.

“We *can* solve this,” Nevaeh said. “Let's just . . . make a list of all the questions we need to answer.”

She began taking notes on her phone. It took only about ten minutes before they'd filled a whole screen:

What was Colin's dad's name if it wasn't Frank or Franklin Creedmont?

Or if it was Franklin Creedmont, why doesn't he show up on Google?

Why would he change his name?

What documents could Colin find to see his dad's name? Birth Certificate? *Full* divorce decree? Are there paper copies? Where?

Where was Colin even born?

Where did Colin and his mom live before they moved to Groveview?

When did Colin's parents live in Pittsburgh?

What “paperwork” does Colin's mom need to deal with in Pittsburgh?

Why doesn't she want to talk about it?

Who sent Colin the key to the storage area?

Why didn't they say who it was from?

Could the key-sender be the same person who told Colin's mom she needed to go to Pittsburgh?

Was it maybe even the same person who called to tell Colin's mom that Colin's dad was dead?

Who did tell Colin's mom his dad was dead?

“Colin, what if the truth is that your dad *isn’t* actually dead, and *he’s* the one who sent you the key?” Nevaeh burst out. “What if this is just an elaborate way for him to get back together with your mom, and claim you as his son, and, and—”

“And, what?” Colin asked angrily. “How could he fix *not* being here the past twelve years? Or having my mom think he’s a horrible person?”

Or my mom getting hurt and it’s my fault? Nevaeh thought. *And I don’t know how to fix it?*

For a while, Nevaeh had been so immersed in Colin’s mystery that she’d almost forgotten about her mom’s accident. That made her feel guilty, too. Was she going to feel guilty the rest of her life?

She poked at a spot on the couch cushion beneath her where the fabric was coming unraveled.

“Colin, what if solving this . . . isn’t worth it?” she asked. “What if your mom’s right, and you *don’t* need to know anything else about your dad? What if finding out would make everything worse?”

Colin stared stonily back at her from the phone screen.

“I still have to know,” he said quietly. “Because not knowing is the worst thing of all. It’s okay if . . . if you don’t want to help anymore. If you don’t want to go to Pittsburgh with Mom and me. But I have to do this.”

Nevaeh felt the scratchy fabric of the sofa beneath her legs. She looked up from the phone, and there was nothing but darkness around her. She knew her whole family was back at the house, just across the barnyard. But all of them felt so far away. It was because of the lie she’d told that morning—the lie that had led to her mother’s accident, the lie Nevaeh still hadn’t fixed. The lie she’d told for Colin’s sake. That lie lay between her and ever feeling right about herself and her family again.

That lie had to be worth something, didn’t it?

“I have to do this, too,” Nevaeh told Colin. “Of course I’m going to Pittsburgh with you.”

Ready for Pittsburgh

The next week and a half dragged by, a seemingly endless stretch of hot, sticky August days. Even without the heat, Colin would have felt like he was constantly in danger of boiling over—of screaming at his mom, *You have to tell me everything! What did Dad do? Why can't I find him online?* But he couldn't ask those questions in front of anyone else. And anytime it was just him and Mom, she had a way of disappearing: to make yet another “really, really important” phone call. Or to insist that she needed yet another walk “to clear my head.”

Even the night Colin feebly offered, “I could come with you,” Mom barely stuck around long enough to say, “Thanks, but not tonight,” before she was out the door yet again.

Mom never wanted to talk about Dad—Colin was used to that—but this was different. Colin hadn't even said the word “Dad” this time. He hadn't hinted that he might possibly bring up Dad before they got to the end of the block.

Why is Mom so jumpy? Colin wondered.

He could see her in his mind's eye as clearly as if he'd actually lifted his phone and taken a photo as she walked out the door: She had dark circles under her eyes. She had worry lines starting around her mouth. Her dark curls were mussed—Mom, who never had a hair out of place. Mom, who never seemed to sweat, even after hours in an unair-conditioned attic.

Something about the Pittsburgh trip is really stressing her out, he thought.

Or maybe she was still freaked out about Dad dying—though she'd seemed to adjust to that news before. Maybe she'd just been pretending to adjust, to make things easier for Colin. Maybe . . .

No! Colin told himself. Don't start feeling sorry for Mom!

Or if he was going to feel sorry for her, he'd have to find solutions on his own.

He sprang up and began searching every place in the house that he thought Mom might have tucked away any official papers with his dad's name on them—Colin's birth certificate, the divorce decree, even his parents' marriage certificate.

The house was small and tidy enough that it only took Colin about fifteen minutes to complete his search.

And there was nothing.

When Mom returned an hour later, she looked so worn out, Colin couldn't bring himself to ask her anything.

Or maybe he was just a coward.

At work, Mom was as efficient as ever, assigning him task after task after task. He didn't even have his friends Deepak, Daryl, or Derek around to help—or to talk to—because they were away at band camp. So the days felt longer and longer—Mom was trying to make up for their time away. And maybe she was making up for Nevaeh's dad being away, too. Mr. Greevey kept having to leave work to drive Nevaeh's mom to doctors' appointments and the actual surgery on her wrist and ankle, and then follow-up checkups, too. Colin had heard the older Greevey kids whispering: "If Dad had his way, he wouldn't leave Mom's side *ever*" and "I told him one of us could drive Mom today, but he won't let us. It doesn't make sense!"

It made sense to Colin. He thought it was nice—that was how married people should act.

But when he tried to say that to Nevaeh, she just fixed him with a hard-eyed stare and said, "You know I've got to get these boxes out to the truck. Sorry."

With Nevaeh so distracted, he thought about confiding everything to his newer friend Ree. But when he texted her a tentative, **Hey. How are you?** it took her hours to reply. And then all she could talk about was how much fun she was having on her trip to visit her grandparents—her father's parents.

Colin couldn't text back after that.

This was almost as bad as the beginning of the summer, when Colin didn't have any friends.

But *he* was different now. In many ways.

Earlier in the summer, Colin had sometimes been so tired after work that he almost fell asleep at the dinner table. Now, though, even after hours of carrying boxes and furniture and other junk up basement stairs and down attic stairs and along sidewalks and driveways and *then* hoisting it all onto some truck—even then, he still found himself lying awake in bed at night, long after bedtime.

If only I'd found everything online, he'd think. If only I had all the answers I want, and then I could stop thinking about it.

He might as well have wished that whoever had sent him the key to the storage unit had sent a letter along with it, explaining everything. Or that he'd found a letter in his old crib explaining everything.

Maybe there was one there—somewhere in the storage unit, anyway—and we just didn't find it because we stopped looking once we heard about Mrs. Greevey's accident.

Colin went so far as to check Google Maps for directions to the storage facility. Maybe he could go in the middle of the night, and Mom would never know. But walking that distance would take two and a half hours—two and a half hours to get there, two and a half hours to get back . . . It wouldn't work.

Not that he was brave enough to walk there in total darkness, anyway.

Or . . . alone.

But finally the Friday arrived that Mom had designated as departure day. Colin got up and showered and came out to breakfast wearing the same kind of clothes he wore carrying junk: shorts and a T-shirt. Mom took one look and said, “How about nicer clothes for traveling?”

“People wear nice clothes to sit in a car for three hours?” Colin asked.

“For when we get there,” Mom said.

Colin noticed that Mom was wearing a dress—one he'd never seen before, with what looked like brightly colored ribbons sewn into the skirt.

“You bought a new dress for this trip?” Colin asked. “Sheesh—did you buy me a suit or something?”

Mom laughed.

“Just a button-down shirt or a polo will be fine,” she said.

Colin went back to his room and changed. It reminded him of the first day of the summer—his first day of working for Mom. She'd insisted he

wear a polo shirt then, too. She'd been so concerned about making a good impression on her customers.

Somehow, during their weeks of working alongside the Greeveys, Mom had stopped caring about appearances so much.

So why does it matter today? he wondered.

"Who are you trying to impress in Pittsburgh?" he asked when he came back out to breakfast.

Mom bit her lip.

"We're staying with an old friend I haven't seen in years," she said. "She's never met you. I just want her to see how handsome you are." She looked down at her own dress. "And . . . I want her to know we're doing okay. In spite of everything."

Colin didn't think he looked much different in a shirt with a collar than he did in a T-shirt. But he had better things to argue about.

"We're staying with someone I don't even know?" he asked. "I thought . . . didn't you make a hotel reservation?"

"And then I canceled it when Leila offered to put us up. Don't worry—you'll like her. She's an artist."

"But if she's such a great friend that we're staying at her house, how come I've never heard you mention her name before?" Colin asked. He plopped his cereal bowl down onto the table a little too forcefully.

"Because I didn't think I'd ever see her again," Mom said. "We kind of . . . lost track of each other."

She stood up, and Colin expected her to go into her usual blur of motion. Usually, she'd have her cereal bowl and coffee cup cleared off the table and into the dishwasher, and the whole rest of the kitchen scrubbed clean in the time it would take Colin to decide between Cheerios and Chex. But Mom just stood there, one hand resting lightly on the back of her chair, not even pushing it in. She swayed a little, and her unfamiliar dress swirled around her.

"It was my fault, not Leila's," Mom said. "I'm the one who didn't stay in touch. So when you meet her, don't think . . . don't think she did anything wrong."

Why would Colin think anyone had done anything wrong?

Oh, because of Dad, he realized. *Because Dad did something wrong, and this must be someone Mom and Dad knew together. . . .*

Usually Colin didn't like meeting new people.

But he couldn't wait to meet this Leila.

14

Nevaeh, Leaving Home

“They’re here!”

Nevaeh heard Prilla’s shout from the kitchen just as her phone dinged with a text from Colin: **Turning into your driveway now!**

Nevaeh reached across the couch and wrapped her arm around her mother’s shoulders.

“Heal fast while we’re away!” she said. “And if you need us to come back to help with anything—”

“Nevaeh, I’ll still have your dad, Axel, and Dalton hovering over me,” her mother laughed. “And Lucy and Sadie.” Those were Axel’s fiancée and Dalton’s girlfriend. “Plus all of Groveview bringing us meals every night. I won’t need any more help than that. So go and have fun and don’t worry about me!”

But Nevaeh saw how Mom winced in pain as Nevaeh stepped away.

Nevaeh still had not apologized to Mom—and still had not admitted that she and Colin had lied about why they wanted to go to the self-storage facility the morning of Mom’s accident. Nevaeh hadn’t chickened out—not exactly. The timing just hadn’t ever been right. What Mom said was true: everyone was always hovering around Mom, watching out for her. Yesterday Mom’s whole Bible study from church had come to cheer her on as she started physical therapy for her ankle and wrist. The day before that, it had been mothers from the high school Drama Boosters who’d shown up with flowers.

Even if Nevaeh backed out of the Pittsburgh trip and stayed home all weekend, she still probably wouldn’t find a single minute to speak to Mom alone.

“Nevaeh, come *on!*” Prilla shouted from the kitchen. “I thought you were ready an hour ago!”

“Yeah, yeah . . . ,” Nevaeh called over her shoulder.

Mom reached for a crutch and struggled to stand up.

“Mom, it’s okay. You can just stay—”

“You think I’m going to let my kids go off to a whole other state and I *wouldn’t* stand in the driveway waving goodbye?” Mom asked.

But it hurts me to watch you try to get around, Nevaeh thought. *It hurts when I know it’s my fault.*

“Here, at least lean on me on the other side,” Nevaeh said.

Mom lifted the arm with the broken wrist ever so slightly. Just that motion made her grimace.

“No, it’s better not letting this touch anything.”

“Is it time for another of the painkiller pills?” Nevaeh asked. “Want me to get the bottle for you before I leave?”

“Yes, but no—do you really want to make the Creedmonts late because I’m giving you another lecture about how I don’t want to get addicted to prescription painkillers?” Mom asked.

Nevaeh knew her mother was avoiding anything stronger than ibuprofen. Even though she seemed to be in pain all the time.

“Mom—” Nevaeh began. Because it felt like apologizing now would be like a painkiller for Nevaeh. Maybe she could confess really fast and then leave, and everything would be okay.

But Prilla swept into the room at that very moment and began pulling Nevaeh away.

“Just because you don’t have to carry around junk boxes this weekend, that doesn’t mean anyone else is going to load your duffel bag for you,” Prilla scolded.

The whole family tumbled out the back door, with Nevaeh, Prilla, *and* Roddy all carrying bags. First Mrs. Creedmont had asked Prilla to come along to “babysit”—a term that offended Nevaeh just as much as it offended Colin—but then Nevaeh had suggested Roddy come, too. She used the excuse of there being some physics speech at Carnegie Mellon on Saturday afternoon that he might be interested in. She’d made up the speech, because she knew Roddy and Prilla didn’t want to tell Dad yet about their college dreams. But it turned out there *actually was* a physics talk going on that weekend—from somebody’s PhD thesis, whatever that

meant. Apparently Carnegie Mellon was the type of place you could listen to a speech about some lofty academic topic pretty much any time you wanted.

Nevaeh thought she'd been masterful setting up a chance for Roddy and Prilla to look at a college campus—which would also give Nevaeh and Colin a chance to sneak away while the older kids were distracted. So Colin and Nevaeh would be able to look for the lock on the bridge without anyone spying on them.

But she didn't get the burst of pride she usually felt when one of her ideas came together. She felt almost numb as she shoved her bag into the back of the Creedmonts' SUV alongside everyone else's. Then she just stood there awkwardly watching Mom hobble down the sidewalk. But Mom didn't immediately sweep in to hug Nevaeh, Prilla, or Roddy one last time. Instead, she went directly to Colin's mom. Nevaeh saw the rubber tip of Mom's single crutch slip as she moved from the concrete of the sidewalk to the gravel of the driveway. Nevaeh raced toward Mom, thinking she'd have to catch her as she fell.

But Mom quickly righted herself by throwing her good arm around Mrs. Creedmont, the crutch pressed between them. Neither woman seemed to notice Nevaeh stumbling to a halt beside them. They were too intent on hugging—and then whispering together.

"You'll make the right decision," Mom said into Mrs. Creedmont's ear. Her voice was so low that Nevaeh was certain: only Mrs. Creedmont and Nevaeh could have heard her. And Nevaeh could only barely hear. "Whatever you decide, it will be okay."

Mrs. Creedmont pulled back, peering intently at Mom.

"The right decision for who?" Mrs. Creedmont asked, her voice even softer than Mom's, even harder to hear. "Me? Or Colin?"

There'd been a time in Nevaeh's life when she would have just come out and asked, *Hey! What decision is Mrs. Creedmont trying to make? What are you two talking about? Tell me!*

But just as Nevaeh saw the pain now in every step her mother took, she also saw the pain on Mrs. Creedmont's face. Mrs. Creedmont wouldn't even tell Colin about his father—it wasn't like she'd start answering questions just because Nevaeh asked.

But I am going to find out what Mrs. Creedmont is trying to decide, Nevaeh thought. Colin and me—we'll figure that out, too. Along with

finding out about Colin's dad.

Nevaeh just wanted to do all that without hurting anyone.

She saw her mother wince as she leaned back on her crutch, and Nevaeh corrected herself: *No—without hurting anyone* else.

New Places for Colin

Colin's phone dinged with a text before Mom had even turned from the Greeveys' gravel driveway back onto the road. Simultaneously, Nevaeh reached over from the seat beside him and switched his phone to silent. Colin flashed her a confused look, and she pointed to her own phone screen. She was typing something quickly:

This is how we'll talk without anyone hearing

Colin grinned and nodded. He remembered a time when he'd been in a minivan with a bunch of baseball teammates, driving back from a game, and everyone else was quiet—and then he'd figured out that all the other kids were going back and forth on a group text chain that left him out. That had felt cruel. But with Nevaeh, it just felt like what they had to do around Mom and Nevaeh's siblings. Prilla had claimed the front passenger seat—"So I can help navigate, if the GPS gets confusing," she'd said—and Colin, Nevaeh, and Roddy were lined up in the back seat. Colin shot a glance past Nevaeh to see if Roddy noticed. But Roddy had slipped on a pair of headphones. The bright flashes of light on his phone screen made it seem like he was watching something about outer space. Or maybe the inner workings of atoms. It was hard to tell.

Nevaeh pointed even more insistently at Colin's phone, and he looked down at the words glowing from the screen: **I heard our moms talking**

A second later, another text popped up: **My mom said she knew your mom would make the right decision. What's your mom trying to decide?**

Colin shrugged, his grin fading. He wrote back: **She just said she needs to go to Pittsburgh for "paperwork"**

How was paperwork a decision?

From the front seat, Mom called out, “You’re all so quiet back there! Who wants to play a car game? Like the alphabet one, maybe? See, you race to be the first one to see all the letters of the alphabet in order, and—”

“Uh, Felicia, everyone’s on their phones,” Prilla said. “I think cell phones kind of ended people ever playing the alphabet game anymore. Sorry.” She turned toward Nevaeh and Colin and mouthed the words, “You’re welcome.”

Nevaeh kicked the back of Prilla’s seat in a way that didn’t exactly seem like a thank-you. A second later, Colin’s phone vibrated with a new text from Nevaeh: **Prilla’s on a first-name basis with your mom now???? Who does she think she is?**

In the front seat, Prilla was telling Mom, “But I know it can be boring to drive when no one else is talking. So we can chat. What do you want to talk about? Pittsburgh, and everything we’re going to see there?”

Maybe she’s helping? Colin texted back to Nevaeh. He thought a minute and added, **You didn’t tell Prilla about the storage unit and the 2nd key, did you?**

Nevaeh’s reply was fast and indignant: **Of course not!**

Mom started talking about Pittsburgh’s mountains, and how they made it complicated to get around. She told about how three rivers met in downtown Pittsburgh—the Allegheny and the Monongahela joining to become the Ohio River.

Colin felt like he was in social studies class.

But then he heard Prilla ask his mom, “You lived in Pittsburgh for a while, right? Was it when you were in college?”

“Oh, I was never able to go to college,” Mom said quickly.

She glanced back over her shoulder, even though there was no reason for her to look around for traffic. They weren’t at an intersection or trying to pass anyone.

It seemed more like Mom was checking to see if Colin was listening.

Colin pretended to be engrossed in some game on his phone. He took a cue from Roddy and, without looking up, stuck in earbuds. But he didn’t push them far enough in to actually block out the conversation.

“Really?” Prilla was saying to Mom. “I just thought . . . you seem like someone who went to college. You seem that *sophisticated*.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Mom said with a laugh. “I do always try to learn things on my own.”

Colin knew she'd been trying to learn French by podcast this summer. Before that, it had been "learn art history over the internet." And when he'd been younger, he'd fallen asleep many nights to the drone of "how to run a successful small business" classes she'd watched online.

For a long time, he'd thought that was just what moms did.

"Did you choose that approach, or was it . . . just how things worked out?" Prilla asked. "Did you avoid college on purpose?"

Mom glanced back a second time, and Colin *knew* she wasn't just looking to see if anyone was behind them. They were still on the country roads that led from the Greeveys' house to the highway. There was nothing around them but cornfields.

"Oh, no," Mom said. "I wanted to go to college so bad when I was your age. But it seemed too expensive. Once I was married, the plan was that I would work while my husband went to school. Then it was supposed to be my turn while he worked. But we got divorced instead."

Colin's phone vibrated with a new text from Nevaeh: **Did you know about that plan???**

Colin shook his head. No. He hadn't known any of that.

"But didn't you get, like, alimony or something?" Prilla asked Mom. "Didn't your ex-husband owe you? I mean, I don't know much about it, but it seems like if you'd had a good divorce attorney, then—I'm sorry. This really isn't any of my business, is it?"

Even from the back seat, Colin could see his mother's jaw go tight. He could tell: she was going to shut down this conversation the same way she shut down every conversation he'd had with her about his dad.

But then Mom reached out her hand and patted Prilla's knee.

"You're a good kid, Prilla," Mom said. "I hope you're never in a position to understand what it's like to go from loving someone to never wanting to see them again. And . . . not wanting to take so much as a dime from them. Even if you deserve it. Even if you have a child, and your child deserves it." Then she actually smiled at Prilla. Smiled! "This is also probably none of my business, but I've heard you and Roddy whispering about applying to college, whether your parents think it's a good idea or not. It's always a good idea to make sure you can support yourself. That you won't need to be dependent on anyone else, once you're an adult. Because you never know what can happen."

In the front seat, Prilla slumped down.

“Oh, man—if you heard us talking . . . do you think Dad did, too?” she asked. “Us Greeveys, none of us are any good at being quiet!”

“No, I don’t think your father heard,” Mom said. “Because you Greeveys—and your dad in particular—you all usually say everything out loud and up front. If your dad heard you and Roddy, he’d have asked right away, ‘What’s this I hear about college?’”

“And, ‘How are you going to pay for it?’ ‘Do you think money grows on trees?’” Prilla said bitterly. “Especially now that Mom’ll have all those medical bills, and she needs a new car . . . Dad always thinks about money first.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Colin saw Nevaeh wince. She was clearly hanging on to every word of Mom and Prilla’s conversation, too.

“Far be it from me to defend Lloyd Greevey,” Mom said, making a face that included both a grimace and an eye roll. “But it looks to me like he thinks about his *family* first. That’s the only reason he cares anything about money. Even if someone handed him a million dollars, he’d still be the same person. The same *Junk King*.”

Prilla giggled, seemingly in spite of herself.

“No way he’d ever give up his Junk King trucks or his 1-800-JNK-KING phone number,” she agreed. “Not even for a billion dollars!”

Mom patted Prilla’s knee a second time.

“You’ve still got another year of high school, right?” she asked. “I’m sure you’ll work something out. Roddy will, too. You’ll see a clear path.”

Mom pulled onto the highway then, and she and Prilla started talking about some TV show both of them watched. Colin shoved his earbuds the rest of the way into his ears and stared glumly out the window. He didn’t feel like texting with Nevaeh anymore.

It isn’t fair, he thought. Why will Mom answer questions about Dad for Prilla, but not for me?

What Mom had said about Mr. Greevey swam in Colin’s head: “Even if someone handed him a million dollars, he’d still be the same person.”

Somehow that hadn’t sounded like Mom was just praising Mr. Greevey.

It sounded more like she’d been criticizing Colin’s dad.

Did someone hand him a million dollars—and it changed him? Colin wondered. *In a bad way?*

He remembered what Nevaeh had said while they were standing in the storage unit that seemed to be full of everything from Colin's infancy: "When you were a baby . . . was your family super rich?"

Someone had had money, and it definitely wasn't Colin or his mom.

Colin reached into his pocket and ran his finger over the ridges of the key he and Nevaeh had found in the storage unit.

What if this key really did lead to some sort of treasure? Something bigger than a bunch of old baby furniture and toys?

How would that change Colin?

New Places for Nevaeh

It wasn't like Nevaeh had never been *anywhere*. She'd gone on junk runs with her dad as far away as Kentucky and Indiana. She'd been to both the Columbus and Cincinnati zoos, because one of her friends in elementary school had been really into animals. And another friend's family was full of amusement park freaks, so Nevaeh had been to Kings Island with them a few times.

But the Greeveys weren't like some other families Nevaeh knew, who went on vacations to Disney World or Myrtle Beach or Pigeon Forge all the time. It wasn't just that the Greeveys didn't have the money. Greeveys were also *happy* staying put. As far as Nevaeh was concerned—and she was pretty sure her whole family felt this way—Groveview was the center of the universe.

But now it felt like a relief to escape. As the scenery along I-70 switched from familiar-looking flat cornfields to rolling hills and woods, Nevaeh thought, *It's three days until I'll be home again—and before I have another chance to apologize and confess to Mom. Because I'll have to do that in person. So I don't have to worry about it the next three days.*

Nevaeh saw a hawk soar over the highway and out of sight beyond the next hill. She was crammed in the middle of the back seat between Roddy's sprawling, gawky long legs on the left and Colin's hunched-over form on the right. But for a moment, Nevaeh felt as free as the hawk.

Was this how Mrs. Creedmont had felt all those years ago, when she got away from her bad husband?

Could running away sometimes be good?

Nevaeh wanted to say that to Colin. Or something like it, without making him feel worse.

Oh, yes . . .

She texted him: Isn't it cool your mom has lived other places? Even a big city like Pittsburgh? Just think. You could have been born anywhere!

She saw Colin glance down at his phone and shrug.

Okay, maybe Nevaeh couldn't explain this to Colin.

Or maybe not to anyone.

In the front, Prilla and Mrs. Creedmont had moved from comparing TV shows to talking movies and music. Nevaeh could have leaned forward and offered her own opinions—she could tell Prilla that nobody cared about the acting in superhero movies, just the special effects. But Prilla kept squealing to Mrs. Creedmont, “You're right! You're so right! That's exactly what I thought!” And it made Nevaeh's stomach feel weird when Mrs. Creedmont complimented Prilla, “You know, I never would have figured that out at your age.”

Don't I want Prilla and Mrs. Creedmont to get along? Nevaeh wondered.

But she also wished that one of them would say, *Oh, Nevaeh, what do you think?* Or, *Isn't it great that Nevaeh and Colin brought everybody together?*

Nevaeh's “free as a hawk” feeling evaporated. Watching Mrs. Creedmont and Prilla act like besties made Nevaeh feel like she was just a little kid, while Prilla was practically grown-up.

Doesn't anybody know I'm the Greevey who's most like Mrs. Creedmont—the one who keeps her side of the room neat and tidy while Prilla's almost as bad as Dad about collecting junk and clutter? Nevaeh wondered. *Doesn't anybody know how much I admire Mrs. Creedmont?*

They probably didn't, because Nevaeh had never told anybody. Not even Colin.

Maybe Mrs. Creedmont and Prilla had stopped talking about movies and music. Because now Prilla was saying, “Isn't it kind of liberating, too? To be able to make all your decisions for yourself, without having to ask anybody? That's what I'm looking forward to about being an adult!”

“I felt that way, too, when I was your age,” Mrs. Creedmont said. “But you know, my parents both passed away more than a decade ago. I still miss them a lot. And I still hear them in my head all the time. It's like they're always there, no matter what.”

Prilla groaned.

“You mean when I’m your age, I’ll still hear Dad’s voice in my head saying, ‘You’re not going to throw that away, are you?’” she asked. She made the “are you?” just as scornful as Dad’s question always was.

“Probably that and, ‘One man’s trash is another man’s treasure!’” Mrs. Creedmont agreed, giving a surprisingly accurate imitation of Dad’s booming voice. “Sorry, you’re stuck with that. He even embedded that saying in my mind in the brief time *I* worked for your dad, back when Colin was a baby.”

“Oh, haven’t you noticed? I got Dad to update that,” Prilla bragged. “Now he says, ‘One *person*’s trash is another *person*’s treasure!’”

“Good for you! Fighting the patriarchy!”

Mrs. Creedmont actually took one hand off the steering wheel to high-five Prilla.

Nevaeh wanted to throw up.

They stopped for a bathroom break just after crossing the Ohio River into West Virginia. Mrs. Creedmont offered to buy everyone snacks from a vending machine, but Nevaeh noticed how relieved she looked when everyone said no thanks. And then they were quickly back on the road, and quickly through that one little corner of West Virginia and on into Pennsylvania.

The hills they were passing turned into mountains. The highway became windier and windier. Even Roddy shut down whatever science video he’d been watching and started gazing out the window.

They went into a tunnel in one of the mountains.

“The first time I came to Pittsburgh, I was about your age, Colin,” Mrs. Creedmont called from the front seat, her face glowing in the dim tunnel lights. “I remember coming out of this tunnel, and there were the lights of downtown right in front of me—it was Christmastime and everything seemed so magical. . . .”

Colin did nothing but nod at her story. But they came out of the tunnel, and Mrs. Creedmont was right: a huge downtown full of skyscrapers suddenly appeared in front of them, gleaming in the bright sunshine.

“That green glass building that looks kind of like a giant castle—that’s the PPG building,” Mrs. Creedmont said. “I always thought that was the prettiest skyscraper ever. And if you look back at the side of the mountain,

there's the funicular you can take to the top. . . . Oops, I'll tell you more later, because my next couple of turns are tricky. . . ."

The highway split and ran along the river—or, one of the rivers. Cars zipped past them, as if Mrs. Creedmont wasn't driving fast enough.

"Driving in a city that's full of mountains and tunnels and sudden turns seems really complicated," Roddy muttered beside Nevaeh.

Nevaeh looked over at her brother. He had droplets of sweat on his upper lip, and he seemed unusually pale.

"You okay?" she whispered.

"Maybe watching a video about the big bang with lots of zoom-ins and zoom-outs wasn't such a great idea on curvy roads," he whispered back.

Nevaeh started to lean forward to tell Mrs. Creedmont to pull over because Roddy was carsick, but Roddy yanked her back.

"Don't tell!" he whispered. "Prilla will never let me live this down!"

"Just don't throw up on me, okay?" Nevaeh told him.

Roddy was five years older than her, but she still watched over him the rest of the drive like it was her job to protect him—like *she* was *his* babysitter. Roddy was probably the quietest of all the Greeveys, and she couldn't really remember the last time she'd looked closely at him. He was always just *there*, muttering about physics theories and absorbing the family jokes about what a nerd and a klutz he was. He was also the butt of family jokes for shaving his head every summer because he hated dealing with sweaty hair. But now Nevaeh noticed that he'd started letting his hair grow out again. Usually he didn't do that until mid-September. Maybe he'd stopped shaving his head as soon as he heard about this trip—his hair was already past the peach fuzz stage.

Because even Roddy started caring about his appearance once he knew he was about to step foot on a college campus? Nevaeh wondered.

Roddy kept his lips pursed as they got off the highway and wound their way up yet another mountainside.

And then Mrs. Creedmont pulled into a short driveway between towering houses.

"Whew!" she said, turning off the engine.

"You've still got the mountain-driving skills!" Prilla congratulated her, raising her hand for another high five.

But Mrs. Creedmont didn't slap her hand.

“Oh, I’ve never driven in Pittsburgh before,” she said. “When I lived here, we didn’t have a car.”

Everybody must have looked stunned, because she laughed.

“It’s not like in Groveview, where everybody has to have a car! It was actually easier just to take public transportation and walk everywhere. Plus, we were really poor. We couldn’t afford a car.”

Nevaeh nudged Colin and whispered in his ear, “So that must have been a long time before you were born. Sounds like your parents were poor before they got rich.”

Colin nodded but didn’t say anything. He looked as unsettled as Roddy.

“Are you carsick, too?” Nevaeh asked.

“Carsick?” Colin asked, squinting in bafflement.

“Never mind,” Nevaeh said.

Mrs. Creedmont and Prilla were already out of the car and pulling bags from the back.

“Okay, here’s the plan,” Mrs. Creedmont said, once everyone was out. “I thought I’d make better time, and I could have driven you all wherever you wanted to go before my, uh, appointment. But now I’m a little nervous about being late, so I have to go.”

“No worries—we’ve got this,” Prilla said. What a show-off.

“For now, you all can just carry your bags into the house,” Mrs. Creedmont went on. “Leila won’t be home until later, but she said we’re welcome to eat anything we find in the kitchen. I also brought a cooler of sandwiches, so you can all have that for lunch. Then if you walk down this hill, you can be at the University of Pittsburgh campus in ten or fifteen minutes. The Carnegie Mellon campus is just a little farther. If you guys want to sightsee, that’s fine, or if you just want to hang out and take it easy, that’s fine, too. I’ll be back before five. I’m sorry not to be a better tour guide, but—tomorrow we can all do something fun together. And with Leila. Okay, Colin?”

“Sure,” Colin said.

“And Prilla and Roddy and Nevaeh, thank you so much for coming here with Colin—I know he’s in good hands. Be careful and make sure you keep track of each other all the time—this area is pretty safe, but we’re not in Groveview anymore.”

“Got it.” Prilla made shooing motions with her hands. “You go on—we’ll be fine!”

Mrs. Creedmont made sure they could get into the house—it took a code, not an actual key, which Nevaeh had never seen before. And then Mrs. Creedmont grabbed a sandwich out of the cooler for herself and backed out of the driveway.

“Woo-hoo!” Prilla cheered as Mrs. Creedmont drove away. “The kids are in charge now!”

She dropped her bag onto the kitchen floor and rushed out into a grander dining room and living room. Nevaeh was right behind her, gawking at everything. The walls were covered in dramatic, brightly colored paintings, and a funky chandelier hung by the staircase. All the couches and chairs looked decades newer and more stylish than anything in the Greeveys’ house.

“This is exactly what my house is going to look like when I’m an adult,” Prilla said.

Nevaeh had been thinking the same thing. It felt like this was something else Prilla was taking from her.

“No, it’s not, Prilla,” Nevaeh said, and the words came out sounding meaner than she expected. “Because you’re always such a slob. This house is way too neat for you.”

“Just for that, *you* can carry all the bags upstairs,” Prilla said, with a grin that took the sting out of her words. “And I would say you have to be banished to sleeping in the worst room, but I know we’re sharing.”

“There’s no time for any of that, not if we’re going to make the one o’clock campus tour,” Roddy interrupted, poking his head out from the kitchen. He still looked pale but was getting some of his color back.

“Oh, you’re going on a campus tour? Then Colin and I can just stay here,” Nevaeh said. “We don’t have to worry about looking for a college yet!”

Maybe she was a little too obvious about grinning at Colin. Because Prilla narrowed her eyes at her. It was almost as though she could tell Nevaeh and Colin intended to sneak out.

Even though there was no way Prilla could know about the key and the locks on the bridge.

“Oh, no—didn’t you hear Mrs. Creedmont?” Prilla lectured, putting her hands on her hips in a total power move. “We stick together. You and Colin are coming on the college tour with us.”

“It’s, like, ninety degrees out, and I do not want to walk around hearing Roddy ask questions about physics,” Nevaeh complained. “And you’ll be reciting lines from plays to impress everyone, and—”

“How about if we walk down to the college with you, and then we just hang out in this library while you’re on the tour?” Colin asked, pointing to a map he’d called up on his phone.

Everyone clustered around him.

“See, here’s the Carnegie Mellon admissions office, and here’s the library. . . . Everything’s close. If we need anything, we’ll text and either of you could be there in, like, five minutes,” Colin said, zooming in on the map.

“That would be so much better than having a whiny kid sister—and pseudo kid brother—following you around and ruining your tour,” Nevaeh backed him up. She added a wheedling smile. “Won’t *you* be happier knowing we’re safe—and in air-conditioning—at the library? It’s a *library*! What could go wrong?”

“Methinks we’re being played, Roddy,” Prilla said, locking eyes with her twin.

“Mrs. Creedmont said, ‘Keep track of each other,’ not ‘Glue yourselves together at the hip,’” Roddy replied with a shrug. He leaned back against the doorframe between the kitchen and dining room. “Although, if someone did glue four people together, would the glue bonds break first between the middle two people or between one of the outer bonds? That’s assuming each bond was glued with equal strength, of course. Hmm . . .”

He gazed off into the distance, as if he’d forgotten about Prilla, Nevaeh, and Colin. He must be feeling better if he was making those kinds of calculations again.

“Okay, okay,” Prilla said, throwing her hands in the air. “Looks like I’m outnumbered. But Colin and Nevaeh, seriously. No talking to strangers, especially if they offer you candy. No getting into strange cars. No sneaking out of the library to—”

“We’re not fools!” Nevaeh protested.

But she could tell she and Colin had won.

Uncharacteristically, Prilla went to dig out makeup from her bag so she could get ready. Roddy bent forward again, but only to stare down at his hands as he pressed four fingers together, then took turns separating them

one or two at a time. Nevaeh was pretty sure he was working out the thought experiment of people being glued together at the hip.

So she felt safe whispering to Colin, “No way we’re staying at that library, right?”

Colin brushed his fingers against the phone map, moving it slightly to the left.

“There’s Schenley Bridge,” he said. “Where the locks are. It’s a seven-minute walk from that library.”

“That’s perfect!” Nevaeh crowed. “Everything is working out!”

But her mind betrayed her by playing back what Prilla had said only a moment earlier: “No sneaking out of the library to—”

It’s not like I lied to anyone this time, Nevaeh told herself. *Colin and I didn’t make any promises. I just said, “We’re not fools!”*

They weren’t being fools—were they?

The Lock on the Bridge

“At last,” Nevaeh said.

Colin shoved his sweat-soaked hair back from his face. Maybe the Carnegie Mellon campus and the Schenley Bridge really were only seven minutes apart for people who knew where they were going. But it had taken Colin and Nevaeh twenty-five minutes to walk the distance, because they’d gotten turned around. Pittsburgh wasn’t like Groveview with its downtown streets crossing in a flat, square grid. Pittsburgh’s streets went up and down and bent at weird angles. And a shortcut that looked like it might be an easy stroll across a parking lot had turned out to be a dead end along a deep ravine.

But now the bridge lay before them, its concrete railings lined with tall chain-link fences.

And the fencing was covered with locks.

“It’s the right bridge!” Colin rejoiced. He hadn’t quite trusted the map. And he’d worried that the pictures they’d seen online might be out of date. Someone could have decided to take away all the locks. He’d read that other cities had done that.

But then it sunk in exactly how many locks there were—at least a hundred. Maybe a couple hundred. Colin groaned in despair.

“What if we can’t find the right one?” he asked.

“You start trying the key in every lock you can,” Nevaeh said. “I’ll walk along the bridge looking for your parents’ names on any of the locks.”

Colin pulled the key out of his pocket. His hands were sweaty, too. What if the key slipped through his fingers and fell through the chain-link fence and got lost, far below?

“Let’s do it the other way around,” he muttered.

He slid the key into Nevaeh’s hand, and she dashed over to reach up for the first lock. Then she stopped.

“Oh, this is going to be easier than we thought,” she said. “This is a skeleton key, so we can skip all the padlocks. They’d take smaller keys. And the combination locks wouldn’t need a key at all. Just numbers.”

Nevaeh drew her hand back and reached instead for a heart-shaped metal lock that looked like it could have been made in the 1800s. It had a frilly design carved into its surface, as delicate as a doily. But all the lines had been invaded by rust.

Nevaeh stuck the key into the hole at the front of the lock but couldn’t get it to turn.

“Ugh—I can’t tell if it’s the wrong lock or if it’s just rusted shut,” she moaned.

“Keep going,” Colin advised. “I’ll check out the other locks with keyholes like that.”

He began walking slowly along the bridge, scanning up and down. The only inscribed names he saw were on padlocks or combination locks.

He and Nevaeh probably were going to have to try the key in every single heart-shaped lock on the bridge.

But the heart-shaped locks were also the only ones that looked like they might have a hollow place inside, where someone could place a message.

“This bridge looks like more of my dad’s kind of thing, than your mom’s kind of thing,” Nevaeh said, moving on to a different lock. Which . . . also didn’t work. “My dad would be like, ‘Look at all these cool locks! Are any of them antiques I could resell?’”

“And my mom would be like, ‘Why clutter up the bridge with those unsightly locks? You should clear them out of the way and appreciate the view!’” Colin agreed.

“What if your mom was different back when she lived in Pittsburgh?” Nevaeh asked.

Colin didn’t know how to think about that. Mom was the person he knew best in the whole wide world. But Mom was acting different this week, anyhow: dreaming up a sudden trip to a city he’d never known she’d lived in, deciding to stay with a friend he’d never heard her mention before, giggling with Prilla on the drive as if they were both teenagers . . .

There was definitely something weird going on with Mom.

Colin kept walking along the bridge, passing a stretch that was almost entirely combination locks. He was approaching the dead center of the bridge—what if he walked all the way to the end, and still saw nothing helpful?

Or what if Nevaeh tried the key in every heart-shaped lock without any luck at all?

What would they do then?

I should take pictures, he thought. *In case we have to figure out clues after we're home again.*

He'd just lifted his phone to get a picture of all the locks ahead of him when he saw it: a rusty old heart-shaped lock that had letters scratched onto its face. The carved letters were clearly newer than the lock itself: rather than matching the reddish rust of the rest of the lock, the letters gleamed silver, as if someone had recently scraped away the rust with a nail or a file to write, F-O-R . . .

Colin jerked back. The letters spelled out, "FOR COLIN."

"Nevaeh!" he called. "It's this one!"

Nevaeh came running. Colin grabbed the heart-shaped lock, holding it as far out from the chain-link of the bridge as he could without actually unlocking it. Annoyingly, someone had stuck a second, newer heart-shaped lock on the curved bar that held the "FOR COLIN" lock in place, and Colin had to shove that one out of the way. But while he held the "FOR COLIN" lock steady, Nevaeh stuck the key into the hole that lay directly above the O of "COLIN."

She turned the key, and . . .

The lock clicked open.

Colin yanked the curved metal bar of the lock up and out of the way. The annoying new lock tumbled down to the sidewalk, but Colin ignored it. He gulped in a deep breath and pulled the "FOR COLIN" lock off the bridge. Holding it in his hands, he swung the front panel open, revealing a small inner compartment.

The compartment held a small, rolled-up piece of paper about the size of a fortune-cookie fortune.

Colin pulled out the paper and let the heart-shaped lock dangle from his fingers. His hands shaking, he unscrolled the paper. It said:

Felicia and Franklin

Celebrating our wedding, April 14, 20—

The last two digits of the marriage date were blurred, as if rain or snow had leaked into the lock over the years and damaged just that edge of the paper.

But Colin stopped thinking about that when he saw the last line of the note:

Our love will last forever

He dropped the lock and the note and collapsed down to hunch over on the sidewalk, his back hard against the chain-link fence.

“Well, that was a lie,” he moaned. “Nothing about their marriage lasted.”

“That’s not *totally* true,” Nevaeh said, crouching hesitantly beside him. “You’re connected to their marriage, and you lasted. You exist. You—”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks for figuring that out, Sherlock,” Colin muttered. “That’s not what I meant.”

He snatched up the scrap of paper again and reached back over his shoulder. He wasn’t entirely sure if he really intended to throw the note down into the ravine or just get it out of his sight for now. But before he could let go, Nevaeh grabbed it out of his hand.

“You might want this later on,” she said. “And . . . it is a clue.”

Colin leaned his head back against the chain-link fence. Cars rattled past on the bridge. A pair of kids who looked to be in college walked past on the opposite side of the bridge, and one of them shot him a curious, concerned look. But then the girl quickly glanced away and kept walking.

Maybe that was an advantage of big cities. People left you alone when you were in agony. Back in Groveview, Colin never would have dared to collapse to a sidewalk in despair and let anyone else see. Because there’d always be someone who would notice and feel like it was their responsibility to call his mom and ask her, *Is everything okay with Colin? What can I do to help?*

Or maybe that’s the advantage of Groveview, Colin thought.

And . . . maybe it was good that he had Nevaeh—his best friend from Groveview, his best friend in all the world—here in Pittsburgh with him.

But even with Nevaeh there, he still felt completely confused about everything.

“Okay, whatever,” he told Nevaeh, his voice coming out gruff and almost angry. “It’s not much of a clue. People are *supposed* to be in love

when they get married. That was never the mystery. The mystery's why they fell out of love." Colin couldn't bring himself to say the rest of what he was thinking: *And why my own father fell out of love with me. And never wanted to see me again.*

He switched tacks.

"Anyway, it's more of a dead end than a clue," Colin said. "This doesn't give us anything else to look for."

Nevaeh pointed to the note.

"You have your parents' wedding date now," she reminded him. She seemed to be purposely holding her hand over the "Our love will last forever" part. "You know the month and day they got married, anyway. And you can guess at various years. You could look that up online, and—"

"That should have shown up when I was looking up my dad's name before, don't you think?" Colin grumbled. "This is useless."

He reached down and grabbed the heart lock—maybe it would make him feel better to throw *that* down into the river. Or down to whatever lay beneath the bridge—it was so high above the ground, he couldn't actually see if there was water down there or just the huge ravine.

He looked down and saw that he'd messed up. He hadn't even grabbed the right heart. Instead of the rusty old one with the words "FOR COLIN" scratched onto the front, he was holding the shiny new one, the one that someone had annoyingly attached to his parents' wedding heart lock instead of to the bridge itself.

So now this lock is going to be lost, and whoever put it there in the first place might come back and be sad that it's missing, and . . .

And Colin saw that this lock also had words on its surface. They were just more subtle. The letters of these words were professionally engraved, not scratched into rust.

And the words on this lock said:

For my beloved son, Colin

Surprises for Nevaeh

“Ooooh, Colin!” Nevaeh couldn’t keep from squealing. “That’s a clue, too!”

“See . . . see if the same key works in this lock,” Colin gasped.

Nevaeh reached into her pocket—where *had* she put that key? It hadn’t seemed that important once they had the other lock open. But now . . .

She had to check both the front and back pockets of her jean shorts before remembering she was also wearing a T-shirt with a pocket. And that was where she’d put the key.

Maybe she was almost as rattled as Colin.

She pulled out the skeleton key and stuck it into the hole on the front of the engraved heart. She tried to turn it to the left, to the right, then re-angled and tried again. And . . .

No luck. This was not the right key for this lock.

“Maybe . . . maybe we can jimmy it open somehow,” she said. “Or maybe once we’re home, we can go back and look in the storage unit. Maybe there’s a second key there. I mean, a third one. Or even more. Maybe we just missed seeing it because . . .”

Because we didn’t look thoroughly at anything, Nevaeh thought. *Because of Mom’s accident.*

And here she’d thought she could avoid thinking for the next three days about Mom, and how it was all Nevaeh’s fault Mom got hurt.

“I don’t want to ruin this,” Colin said. He ran his fingers over the lock, tracing the letters of “beloved son.” Did he even realize he was doing that? “But I don’t want to wait until we’re home to open it, either.”

Nevaeh pulled out her phone, ready to look up “how to pick a lock without damaging it.” But then she saw the time glaring from her screen:

1:50 p.m.

“Whoa,” she said. “We’re lucky that lock isn’t still attached to the bridge. Because we’re going to have to take it with us. If we need twenty-five minutes to get *back* to that library, we’re in trouble.”

“Oh, okay,” Colin said. But he sounded as if he hadn’t quite heard her. He cradled the “For my beloved son, Colin” lock in one hand, and started to reach down for the other heart-shaped lock and the fortune-cookie-sized note, too. But then he drew his hand back, as if he wasn’t sure he was entitled to take the rusty heart or the message it had held.

“That lock says, ‘For Colin,’ too,” Nevaeh reminded him.

“Yes, but what if Mom comes looking for it?” he asked. “What if it just makes her mad at Dad all over again if she walks across this bridge and doesn’t see it?”

“It’s up to you,” Nevaeh said. She turned her phone so he could see the time, too. “But you need to decide fast.”

Colin stood up. After a moment, he stuck the paper back into the rusty heart and fastened that lock back onto the chain-link fence.

But he kept the “For my beloved son, Colin” heart lock cradled in his hand.

Silently, the two of them headed back toward the Carnegie Mellon campus. Nevaeh kept sneaking glances at her phone.

It’s not like Prilla or Roddy would yell at us if we’re late and they find out we sneaked out, Nevaeh thought.

They would just look and act really disappointed.

And they wouldn’t trust Nevaeh and Colin ever again.

And Nevaeh would have to tell Prilla and Roddy the truth about the locks on the bridge and the key from the storage unit—and Mom’s accident—if Nevaeh and Colin had any hope of being able to follow any more clues here in Pittsburgh.

Nevaeh didn’t want to talk to anyone about Mom’s accident.

Maybe Nevaeh was thinking too much about Mom, and Colin was thinking too much about the heart lock he’d crammed into his shorts pocket. Because they got turned around again, and it took twenty minutes to get back to the library.

“Come on!” Nevaeh said, when the glassy building finally appeared ahead of them. “Run!”

She grabbed Colin's arm to pull him along. Then, when they were almost to the low-roofed section that shaded the entrance, she jerked him backward.

"No—stop!" she hissed. "Watch out!"

She yanked him instead into a nearby hedge.

"What are you doing?" Colin demanded.

"Roddy going into the building right now!" Nevaeh explained. "We probably just missed seeing Prilla go into the building ahead of him. We'll have to go into a different door, and . . ."

She watched as Roddy let go of the library door too soon. It slammed against his heel. Apparently it also knocked off the back of his shoe, because he bent down in the middle of the doorway and tugged at the battered canvas. He almost fell over.

Even as she worried about getting caught, Nevaeh could marvel fondly, *What an uncoordinated klutz.*

It was strange watching Roddy out in public on a college campus, instead of back in Groveview. Was this how a stranger would see him? He looked . . . weird. Greeveys in general didn't pay much attention to what they were wearing. But Nevaeh wished now that she or Prilla—or, who knows, Axel or Dalton or Mom or Dad—had told Roddy that a plaid shirt and striped shorts didn't go together.

Finally Roddy seemed to have his shoe fully back on. He straightened up and went on into the library.

But a second later, he stepped back out the door and peered all around, as if unsure he'd been in the right building.

"Okay, change of plans," Nevaeh muttered to Colin. "Follow me."

As soon as Roddy turned in the opposite direction, she sprang up and sped toward him. After a brief hesitation, Colin stumbled away from the hedge and past a set of bike racks to join her.

Nevaeh took a deep breath and tapped Roddy on the shoulder.

"Boo!" she said.

Roddy whirled around.

"Didn't you see us?" Nevaeh demanded. "We were right there!"

She waved her arm vaguely toward the library, as well as toward the hedge where they'd actually been hiding. She made it sound like she and Colin had been waiting inside the library like they were supposed to, and just followed Roddy out.

Nevaeh flashed Roddy an innocent-looking smile. She had to secretly elbow Colin, but then he did the same.

“Oh, right . . . ,” Roddy said, his voice wavering.

“Where’s Prilla?” Nevaeh asked. Because she was the one they’d really need to fool.

“Still back with the tour group,” Roddy said. He rubbed his head. Then he pulled his hand back and stared at it in a puzzled way, as if he’d forgotten he let his hair grow again, and he didn’t trust his own nerve endings. He seemed even more disoriented than usual. “She’ll catch up. I guess.”

Nevaeh had to hide the triumph from showing in her grin now. They weren’t going to get in trouble from anyone!

But then she looked a little closer at Roddy. He didn’t quite meet Nevaeh’s gaze—as if he, not Nevaeh, had something to hide.

“Hey, Einstein!” someone called behind them, from across the green lawn. “It was nice meeting you!”

Nevaeh’s first thought was, *Roddy made friends fast! I knew he’d like the people on a college campus!*

But when Nevaeh turned around, she saw a group of giggling girls. And they definitely weren’t laughing *with* Roddy.

They were laughing at him.

“Leave him alone!” she shouted back over her shoulder. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Uh, Nevaeh, it’s not making me look any cooler to have my kid sister defend me,” Roddy muttered. “Just ignore them. Let it go. It doesn’t matter.”

“You sure?” Nevaeh asked. “Colin and I could go over and intimidate them with our massive muscles.” She flexed an arm and pretended to admire her own biceps. No—she really was admiring her biceps. After the summer of carrying boxes, she actually *did* have muscles.

Still, she got the reaction she wanted: Roddy cracked up.

“Seriously, I will never see those kids again in my life,” Roddy said. “Who cares what they say or think?”

But his eyes darted to the side.

Nevaeh grabbed his arm and yanked him back into the library. Dimly, she noticed that Colin followed.

“Okay, spill,” she commanded Roddy. “What happened with those girls?”

Roddy shook his head.

“It wasn’t them,” he said. “Not really. It was this other guy in our tour group. . . . We were going around saying what we wanted to study, and I said something about Einstein’s theories about . . . well, I won’t go into all the details. But this guy interrupted and said, ‘Those theories were debunked a century ago—you’d have to time travel to find anyone with half a brain who’s still interested in *that*.’ And everyone laughed. I guess those girls are just . . . still laughing.”

Nevaeh had the weird feeling that he wasn’t telling the whole story.

“People laugh at you all the time back home,” she said. “Why should things be any different here?”

“Back home, people laugh *fondly*,” Roddy said. “This was mean.”

He looked down, as if he’d gotten distracted by the tile pattern on the floor.

He’s still not telling the whole story, Nevaeh thought.

But it seemed like he wasn’t going to.

“Anyhow, Prilla and me, we didn’t want to leave you alone too long,” Roddy said. “I thought the three of us could go find ice cream somewhere, and Prilla will meet us.”

“Ice cream sounds good,” Nevaeh said. “What do you think, Colin?”

“Think?” Colin repeated vaguely.

“About ice cream.”

“Okay, sure,” he said.

They walked to three different ice cream stores that all seemed too expensive before finally agreeing to get a container of mint chocolate chip from a CVS. They sat down on a wide-open grass lawn to eat it straight from the carton. Roddy told them the lawn wasn’t really a lawn—it was what the university called a “quad.” That was short for quadrangle. Nevaeh said it figured that a college would come up with a fancy name for something that was just a square, and Roddy reminded her that squares *were* quadrangles, and it made her feel good that she’d given him a chance to act smarter than everyone else. (She knew squares were quadrangles.) And the ice cream was really good.

But Prilla didn’t show up until the ice cream was almost all gone, melted down into green mush. And, strangely, she and Roddy seemed not

to be talking to each other.

And Colin just kept staring off into space. They were right by a strange sculpture that made it look like a bunch of people were walking up a pole straight into the sky. And even when Nevaeh said, “Aren’t you going to take a picture of that?” Colin acted like he hadn’t even seen it.

Nevaeh didn’t stand up and take a picture, either.

Because it seemed like looking at the picture later on wouldn’t remind her of all the fun they’d had sitting on a college quad, eating ice cream straight from the carton.

It would just remind her how everybody was acting weird today.

And how Nevaeh herself couldn’t stop thinking, *If only I’d apologized to Mom before we left home, everything would be fine. If only I hadn’t caused Mom to have that accident and get hurt in the first place, everything would be fine.*

But she had caused the accident. Mom had gotten hurt. And Nevaeh hadn’t apologized.

Nothing was fine.

19

Surprises for Colin

My beloved son, Colin thought. *My beloved son . . .*

They were back at the house belonging to Mom's friend he'd never heard her mention before. Colin had hidden the heart lock they couldn't open deep in his duffel bag. He was relieved that no one but Nevaeh had seen it; he was a little surprised that he'd managed to carry it around in his pocket—sticking out just a little, even—and neither Prilla nor Roddy had noticed.

For that matter, he was surprised they couldn't just look at him and see some thought bubble glowing over his head with the words, "My beloved son . . ." in neon lights. That's how obsessed he was.

My beloved son, Colin . . .

He got a jolt like an electric charge every time he thought about the words engraved on the shiny new heart lock that had been attached to the rusty old one. And then his thoughts followed a roller coaster: *Beloved! That means my dad loved me, after all! Because that has to have been left there by my dad, right?* Then he would dip into: *But if I was so beloved by my dad, why did he write it on a lock on a bridge there was no guarantee I'd ever see, instead of just coming to see me in Groveview anytime in the past twelve years? He didn't treat me like a "beloved son"!*

But then, like a roller coaster rising out of a tunnel, he'd swing around to: *There's still something going on that I don't understand. Some explanation I have to find. Nevaeh and I are going to find it. . . .*

And then he'd be back to *My beloved son. My beloved son . . .* all over again.

"Cool view, huh?" Nevaeh said beside him.

"What?" Colin said.

Nevaeh grabbed his arm and shook it.

“Earth to Colin!” she said. “Look around!”

Colin blinked. They were sitting on a deck at the back of the house, and they could see down past treetops and the roofs of other houses on the slope below them. A dramatic tower stood off in the distance, framed by leafy green branches.

“That’s the Cathedral of Learning, right?” Nevaeh asked him, pointing toward the tower. She let out a long whistle. “Fancy-shmancy, don’t you think? Just imagine if someone wanted to build something like that in Groveview. People like Steve from Steve’s Self-Storage would be like, ‘What do we need that for? We’ve got churches, we’ve got schools—who needs a whole skyscraper to be a cathedral of learning?’” She pronounced the words “cathedral” and “learning” in the most comical accent ever. Then she went back to her regular voice. “But I like it. I liked that weird sculpture back at Carnegie Mellon, too, with the people walking up the pole to the sky. Do you think they like creating tall things here because they’re so used to seeing mountains around them?”

“I don’t know,” Colin said.

“Are you still thinking about—?” Nevaeh began. She cut off as she gazed up toward the house’s second story. Two of the windows were hanging open.

“Are Roddy and Prilla taking their bags up to their rooms?” Colin asked. He hoped Nevaeh would realize he was really trying to say, *You know we can’t talk about this if Roddy and Prilla could overhear.*

Nevaeh frowned and held up her phone. She added an eye roll as if to say, *Seriously? We’re going to have to resort to communicating by text even when we’re sitting on a deck alone?*

But just then the door behind them slid open.

“There you are!” Colin’s mom exclaimed, stepping out onto the deck. “Leila, meet Colin. Colin, *I* would have you call her Mrs. Atenabe, but she’s going to say, ‘Oh, call me Leila’ first thing.”

A tall, elegantly dressed Black woman stepped onto the deck alongside Mom. She had generous laugh lines around her eyes, and an impish expression.

“Ah, Felicia, you still know me well,” she chuckled. “Colin, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

She had an elegant accent, too. Maybe she was from England?

Mom was miming something—oh, yeah. Apparently Colin was supposed to stand up and hold out his hand for shaking. He tried, but tripped over his own feet on his way across the deck.

Leila caught him.

“It took me some time to adjust to the length of my legs when I was your age, too,” she said sympathetically.

“I always wondered what that was like,” Mom said with a grin. Colin had been taller than his mother since he was nine. And now Mom looked shorter than ever, standing by Leila.

“And this must be your friend. Nevaeh, is it?” Leila reached out, including Nevaeh in the conversation.

Nevaeh came over and shook Leila’s hand the way Colin had been supposed to.

“Yes, hi. Boring old average-height kid here,” Nevaeh said, pumping Leila’s hand enthusiastically up and down.

“Or else you are the Goldilocks of our little group, and you are just right,” Leila said.

Colin liked that she had managed to say something kind to both him and Nevaeh. Leila smiled politely at Nevaeh, but quickly turned her attention back to him. She put her hands lightly on Colin’s shoulders.

“Oh, my,” she said. “When I started renting out rooms to medical students all those years ago, I never thought about how a moment like this would come around and make me feel so much like a grandmother. An unofficial grandmother, but still. Felicia, he’s just perfect. The best blend of both of you.”

Colin felt his face turning red. He was pretty sure nobody had ever called him perfect before. And the rest of it . . .

Doesn’t Leila know we never talk about my dad? Didn’t Mom tell her?

He opened his mouth, but what came out instead was, “Medical students? Mom, you weren’t ever a medical student, were you? I thought you didn’t even go to college!”

“Oh, no, it was your *father* I rented the room to, first,” Leila corrected, as if it were just a simple misunderstanding. “And then when your parents got married, it’s true, I was living with both of them. But your father had to study all the time, so for your mom and me, it was almost like—”

“My father went to medical school?” Colin blurted. “My father was a doctor?”

Leila arched an eyebrow and peered toward Mom.

“Frank was never part of Colin’s life after . . . after everything that happened,” Mom said. Her voice started out faint, then firmed up. She shrugged, as though Dad was of no consequence whatsoever. “It just became easier not to talk about him.”

Colin had just met Leila. She was a gray-haired old lady—easily twenty or thirty years older than Mom, which made her about fifty years older than Colin. She could be a grandmother. But he saw Leila roll her lips inward for an instant, and he felt like he could read her mind. She had to be thinking, *Easier for you, sure. But what about Colin?*

She was on his side. He was certain of it.

But all she said was a gentle, “Ah, I see.” She glanced at her watch. “I look forward to talking with you more at dinner tonight, Colin. And with you, too, Nevaeh. We’ve got twelve years to catch up on! But if we’re going to *have* dinner before midnight, I should go start it.”

“I’ll help,” Mom said.

“Colin and I can, too,” Nevaeh said quickly.

“No, no, it sounds like you guys walked a lot today,” Mom said. “You relax and take it easy. We’ll be fine.”

Translation: Mom’s going to tell Leila not to say anything else about Dad, Colin thought glumly. *That’s why she doesn’t want Nevaeh and me to help.*

“Felicia, do you remember how to light the grill?” Leila asked. “It’s the same one I’ve always had.”

Mom moved toward the grill at the other end of the deck. Leila stepped back inside.

Was this Colin’s chance?

“I’ll be right back,” he told Nevaeh. “Got to go to the bathroom.”

There wasn’t time to wink at Nevaeh or to lock eyes and try for their usual mind-meld. But he hoped she would figure out she needed to start talking to Mom, to keep her out on the deck while Colin followed Leila into the kitchen. And—yes! As Colin stepped into the house and began sliding the glass door shut behind him, he saw Nevaeh walk toward the grill and say with forced casualness, “How was your day, Mrs. Creedmont?”

Colin raced after Leila, catching up just as she stepped from the dining room into the kitchen.

“Please,” he said.

Leila turned, a look of distress on her face. The way Colin sounded, she probably thought he was having an emergency. Maybe she thought someone had died.

Someone did die, he reminded himself. *My dad.*

But the way it felt to Colin, his dad might as well have died twelve years ago.

He didn’t hold back. He let the words spill out, sounding every bit as desperate as he felt.

“What was my father like when you knew him?” he asked. “Do you know why my mother won’t talk about him? Do you know what happened?”

Leila froze in the doorway. Colin kind of wished he could take a picture of her just then, because her face contained so many different emotions all at once. She *did* want to tell him everything—he could see it.

She took him by the shoulders again, and it almost felt like she was trying to give him some backbone. Some strength.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “If your mother hasn’t answered those questions for you, it’s not my place to fill in the gaps. I—I’m sure she will talk with you. In good time.”

Colin jerked away.

“Never mind, then,” he mumbled. “Forget I asked.”

His mother would be ashamed of him for sounding so rude, but he couldn’t stand there a moment longer with Leila gazing at him so sympathetically. Anyhow, he couldn’t think what could be polite, when he really wanted to snarl, *In good time? Good time? Mom waited so long to tell me anything that my father’s already dead!*

He whirled around and took off running for the stairs. He couldn’t go back outside and act normal around Nevaeh and Mom. Not now. He wasn’t fit to hang out with anyone.

But when he got to the top of the stairs, he couldn’t remember which room he was supposed to share with Roddy.

Why wasn’t he back home, where he could just go into his own bedroom and close the door?

He could hear muffled voices from one bedroom—were Roddy and Prilla both in there? The next bedroom also had its door pulled shut, but Colin slammed his shoulder against the wood and shoved the door open.

This bedroom was empty. He could have privacy here.

He went over and sank onto the bed. His legs were trembling. He kicked his heels against the frame of the bed.

He'd made a fool of himself to Leila. And now Leila would probably tell Mom what Colin had said, and it wouldn't surprise Colin if Mom cut off all contact with Leila. . . .

And Colin would never know anything.

Colin slumped and kicked his legs back and forth again, like a little kid throwing a tantrum. But this time his heels hit something softer than the wooden bed frame—something that had been shoved under the bed.

Colin bent over to look. As angry as he was, he still didn't want to damage anything that belonged to Leila.

But it was Mom's suitcase under the bed—a sleek-looking black one he didn't remember seeing before this weekend. Why would he have? The two of them didn't normally go anywhere outside Groveview long enough to need luggage. Mom being Mom, of course she'd tucked the suitcase under the bed so it was out of the way, not cluttering up the room.

Or . . . was she trying to hide it? Colin thought suddenly.

He remembered her vague reference to the purpose of the trip to Pittsburgh being "paperwork."

Before he could think too much about it, Colin grabbed the handle of the suitcase and tugged it out from under the bed. He unzipped it and lifted the top section.

Shirts and pants folded with military precision lay inside the suitcase. Of course Mom would be this tidy. Colin was pretty sure the shorts and T-shirts in his own duffel bag were practically in knots. It was hard not to get clothes scrambled together when the bags were turned one way and another and jolted up and down on the mountain highways.

So did Mom actually repack once she got here? Colin wondered.

That was ridiculous. Mom would be more likely to unpack completely and hang her clothes in the closet, so they wouldn't wrinkle.

So if Mom did repack, maybe . . . maybe there was a different reason?

Colin lifted out the top layer of clothes, and then the next layer, too. He kept going until he'd emptied out the whole suitcase, all the way down to the fabric lining. And he'd found nothing more suspicious than a toothbrush.

“Where’s the paperwork, then, Mom?” he growled, as if she were right there. “Where’d you hide it?”

Even if Mom were right in front of him, she wouldn’t have answered. Even if he stalked downstairs right now and demanded answers—even if he screamed and yelled and insisted, no matter who heard him—she still wouldn’t tell him a thing.

That made Colin so angry that he jerked up on the suitcase’s lining, exposing a seam that had previously been hidden. Colin dug his fingers into the seam. He could rip out the lining completely, turning Mom’s nice new suitcase into trash, something she would be forced to throw out. That would serve her right.

But how would that help with the mysterious paperwork?

For all Colin knew, the “paperwork” was all just electronic, hidden in cyberspace, protected by Mom’s passwords.

But why would Mom have come to Pittsburgh to deal with paperwork that’s all electronic?

It had to be actual paper. And that meant it was *somewhere*.

And Colin still thought this suitcase was the likeliest place.

He clutched the suitcase lining more tightly, his fingers still in the seam. Somehow, the seam was stitched together with plastic thread. No—plastic teeth.

It was a zipper.

Colin ran his fingers to the edge of the lining, where he found the tiny top of the zipper hidden in a fold of fabric. He pulled it down, unzipping the entire seam.

And there, beneath the lining, flat against the frame of the suitcase, was a sheaf of papers in a folder labeled in Mom’s tidy handwriting: *To be returned to safe deposit box at bank.*

Ohhh, Colin thought.

No wonder he hadn’t been able to find any important papers lying around his own house.

His hands shaking, Colin pulled out the folder. He scattered the papers across the floor, barely stopping to read the official-looking titles on each one: Marriage Certificate, Birth Certificate, Divorce Decree, Death Certificate, Name Change Minor Packet . . .

Colin’s jaw dropped.

The last page slipped from his hand, and he grabbed his phone instead.
He texted Nevaeh:

Come quick! Dad didn't change his name after the divorce. Mom changed hers

He kept hitting the wrong letters. It took him three tries to add the last sentence:

She changed my name too

20

Nevaeh Puts It All Together

Nevaeh took the stairs two at a time. She'd spat out some ridiculous excuse to Mrs. Creedmont as soon as Colin's text arrived—would Mrs. Creedmont really believe that Nevaeh had a sudden, urgent need to unpack her duffel bag before dinner?

Who cares, especially if Mrs. Creedmont's name really isn't Mrs. Creedmont? Nevaeh thought, almost slamming into the wall as she came to a landing and turned a corner to race up the last five steps to the second floor.

All the doors on the second floor were closed, and even in her haste, Nevaeh hesitated to go running into strange rooms in a strange house when all she wanted to do was find Colin. Then she heard Prilla's voice rising from behind one of the doors: "No, it wasn't like that!"

What was that about?

Nevaeh didn't take the time to find out. Instead, she shoved her shoulder against the next bedroom door, making it swing open and bang against the wall.

And there was Colin sprawled out on the floor with an open suitcase shoved off to the side and papers fanned out before him.

"Colin?" Nevaeh said, because Colin didn't even look up. "Er—should I still call you Colin?"

"My first name was always the same," Colin said. His voice sounded strangled. Unfamiliar. Like maybe it did belong to someone else. "It was the last name she changed." He picked up one of the papers from the floor. "This is a birth certificate for Colin Creekman. Creekman with a *k*, not a *d*. And 'man,' not 'mont.' I'm not even myself!"

“Maybe that birth certificate is really . . . someone else’s?” Nevaeh asked. She knew it was a ridiculous question even before the words left her mouth. Still, she went on. “And your mom is just . . . clearing up some mistaken-identity confusion?”

“It’s my birth date. And the parents are Felicia and Franklin,” Colin said dully. “Just . . . Felicia and Franklin *Creekman*. Mom never even told me my real name! *That’s* how much she lied to me!”

Nevaeh saw the words “Name Change” on one of the other documents on the floor in front of Colin.

Damage control, she thought.

“Okay, that’s not exactly a *lie* your mom told you,” she protested. “Not if she changed your name legally when you were . . . a baby, I guess?” She leaned down and looked at the date on the Name Change form. It was from the year she and Colin were born. “Yeah—a baby. So she never lied to you about your name. Every time she said, ‘Your name is Colin Creedmont,’ it was always true.”

Not like when I lied to my mom about why Colin and I wanted her to drive us to the self-storage unit, Nevaeh thought. *That was truly a lie. . . .*

Nevaeh swatted that thought away. But it kind of felt like she needed Colin to forgive his mom for her almost-lie. Because Nevaeh wanted to be forgiven for her own really-it-was-a-lie.

“Look,” Nevaeh said. “I think sometimes women change their names back to their maiden names when they get divorced. She probably just changed your name to match hers. Once, you know, your dad was out of the picture.”

“Her maiden name wasn’t Creedmont,” Colin growled, picking up another document labeled Marriage Certificate, and shaking it at Nevaeh. “It was—are you ready to laugh?—*Crudup*. It might as well have been ‘puke.’ Or ‘vomit.’”

Nevaeh recoiled. The elegant Mrs. Creedmont had once been Felicia Crudup?

Now she really felt sorry for Mrs. Creedmont.

“Can’t you see why she wouldn’t want to go back to that?” Nevaeh asked. “Did you really want to go through life as Colin Crudup?”

“I wanted to go through life knowing who I am,” Colin muttered. “And who my parents are.”

“Okay, okay, but . . .” Nevaeh felt like she could fix this. “You know your mom thought your dad was a terrible person. You can’t blame her for not wanting to keep a terrible person’s name. Or letting you be known as the son of a terrible person.”

“We *moved*,” Colin said. “Once we got to Groveview, nobody knew anything about my dad regardless.”

Nevaeh felt like everything was jumbled up in her brain all at once. She remembered a moment earlier in the summer when her dad and older brothers thought Mrs. Creedmont might have committed a crime. And her brother had said the name “Fe-lee-she-uh Creedmont” mockingly, as if she was all hoity-toity, pretending to be something she wasn’t.

Apparently Mrs. Creedmont truly had been pretending to be someone she wasn’t, all along.

But is it fair to think that? It’s the same for her name as it was for Colin’s. Once she legally changed her name, she was Felicia Creedmont. Even if that wasn’t how she began.

Nevaeh didn’t feel like she was the same person she’d been even at the start of the summer, let alone way back the day she was born.

Why couldn’t adults change, too?

And what was wrong with changing your name if you felt like you’d become a completely different person?

Colin sniffled, one of the most forlorn sounds ever. Nevaeh slid down to sit on the floor beside him and put her arm around his shoulders.

“I get why you’re upset,” she said. “But . . . this does help you. I bet if you look up Frank or Franklin *Creekman* online, you could find out who he was and what he did. And maybe even why your mother won’t talk about him.”

Colin jolted.

“Oh, right,” he said. “I probably can.”

But he didn’t pull out his phone.

“Or we can wait,” Nevaeh said. “Either way.”

“No, no . . .” Colin gulped. “I can do it right now.”

He struggled to sit up straight—it was like seeing someone trying to grow a spine. He overcorrected and tilted one way, then the other, before lifting his phone and starting to type.

And then he gasped.

Nevaeh pressed her head against Colin's so she could see the angry words scrolling across his phone screen:

DOCTOR SENTENCED TO FIVE YEARS IN PRISON

DOCTOR BROKE OATH ABOUT SAVING LIVES

DOCTOR "MIGHT AS WELL HAVE PUT GUN TO MY FATHER'S HEAD AND PULLED THE TRIGGER," WITNESS TESTIFIES

"My father's a murderer?" Colin whimpered. "I'm the son of a murderer?"

21

Colin, Stunned

“This doesn’t change anything about who *you* are,” Nevaeh said.

But Colin saw how she jerked back, almost as if she didn’t want to be associated with him anymore.

“Yeah, right—so I’ve always been the son of a murderer,” Colin moaned. “I just didn’t know it.”

Nevaeh squinted even more intently at the phone screen.

“This doesn’t say he actually killed anyone, just that he might as well have,” she muttered. “Click on that story that calls him a drug-ring doctor. Does that mean . . . was he a drug dealer on the side?”

Colin felt like he couldn’t breathe. Or move. Nevaeh had to be the one who stabbed her finger against the screen. Colin made himself blink again and again to bring the words into focus:

During the trial, DEA agents testified that Dr. Creekman sold prescriptions to “patients” who came to his practice from hundreds of miles away. The bulk of those prescriptions were filled at the pharmacy owned by his friend, Otis Flood, making his business one of the leading distributors of opioid medications in the entire country four years in a row. This was despite the fact that their town had a population of less than 5,000. . . .

“Oh, I guess it wasn’t really ‘on the side,’” Nevaeh said. “He was *prescribing* drugs. Maybe . . . maybe it was just all a misunderstanding?”

“I don’t think doctors get sent to prison over ‘misunderstandings,’” Colin said. “And since when do doctors *sell* prescriptions? I—”

He broke off because just then he heard his mom calling up the stairs, “Hey, kids! Dinner’s almost ready! Wash your hands and come on down!”

Colin clicked out of the old news story as if he feared his mother might develop X-ray vision and be able to see what he was reading from downstairs. He shoved the phone back into his pocket. Then he peered at all the papers scattered on the floor before him and froze.

“We can take pictures to look at later,” Nevaeh suggested.

“What if Mom sees the pictures on my phone?” Colin asked. He could feel the panic rising. What if Mom came up the stairs to make sure they’d heard her? What if she caught him snooping in her suitcase?

What if she found out he knew about his father now?

Colin gave Nevaeh’s shoulder a little shove.

“You go down and tell Mom I’m right behind you,” he said. He thought about the effort it would take to walk down the stairs. To smile and act normal around Mom and Leila, this stranger he’d just met. A stranger who’d known both his parents all those years ago . . .

Does she know my father became a criminal? Colin wondered. When she smiled at me in the kitchen and looked so sympathetic . . . did she know all along what my father had done?

She probably did.

Colin’s stomach twisted.

“No—I changed my mind,” he said. “Go tell Mom I’m sick. I can’t go down there. Not now. I can’t look Mom in the face. I can’t sit at the table and chew and answer questions about what I think of Pittsburgh when—”

“You know your mom won’t say, ‘Oh, Colin’s sick so I’ll leave him alone,’” Nevaeh argued. “You know she’ll come straight up here and feel your forehead and maybe take your temperature and see if you need Pepto-Bismol or Tylenol or something like that.”

Colin groaned. Nevaeh was right.

“Kids?” Mom called again from below.

Nevaeh scrambled up and opened the door a crack.

“Coming!” she shouted. “Just give us a minute!”

Nevaeh shut the door again. She yanked out her own phone and began taking pictures of the papers strewn across the floor.

“Your mom won’t check *my* phone for anything suspicious,” she said.

Nevaeh was moving her phone too fast—the pictures were going to be blurry. Maybe even too blurry to read. But Colin couldn’t bring himself to tell her that. He just sat there.

Nevaeh finished taking pictures and pulled the papers into a stack. She shoved them back into the folder and dropped it back into the suitcase.

“Not there,” Colin managed to say. “It was zipped under the lining, under all her clothes.”

“Okay,” Nevaeh said.

“And the suitcase was under the bed.”

Nevaeh flashed him a worried look. But she put the suitcase back together and zipped it shut. Then she shoved it under the bed.

“Anything else?” she asked.

Colin stood up. But that made him dizzy. Maybe he really was sick. He flopped back down onto the bed and slid down until he could hide his face in the pillow.

“Tell Mom I’m so tired, I want to sleep instead of eating,” he said.

He could almost feel Nevaeh still hovering above him.

“I really don’t want to lie about—” she began.

“It’s true,” Colin said. “Not a lie.”

“All right,” Nevaeh said.

He heard her footsteps going away from him, then down the stairs. There were other footsteps, too—probably Prilla’s and Roddy’s. Colin rolled onto his side, pulling his knees toward his chin. He wrapped his arms around his knees, so his body was coiled up as tightly as possible. He could have been a caterpillar in a cocoon. Or a mummy in a tomb. He waited.

After a few moments, he heard more footsteps on the stairs, someone coming back up. He heard the bedroom door squeak open.

“Colin?” It was his mom’s voice, just a whisper.

Colin didn’t so much as flutter an eyelash.

“Poor baby,” Mom murmured. “You’re already sound asleep? I guess you all must have walked a lot today. Of course you’re wiped out. You can eat later.”

He heard her tiptoe across the room. A moment later, he felt a blanket settling around his shoulders. Mom tucked the other end of it under his toes, just like she used to when he was a little kid.

The hinges of the door squeaked again.

She was gone.

Colin lay still for an extra moment or two, listening hard. But there was no sound except the hum of traffic outside. He let go of his knees and

eased his phone back out, keeping it hidden under the blanket. He bent his head down to peer under the blanket.

I'll just play a game, he told himself. I don't need to look up anything else about my dad. I can wait until Nevaeh's back before I do that.

But he found himself typing in the name "Franklin Creekman" again, and hitting return.

The same links came up once more. This time he clicked through each one. He'd read a sentence or two and think, *I can't take any more of this!* and look away. But then, like a moth drawn to a flame, he always had to look back.

All the top links were from ten or twelve years ago. Franklin Creekman had been arrested when Colin was only six months old. He'd been sent to prison before Colin's second birthday. The stories that came up were from old news sites, and they were about facts: laws broken, punishment doled out. Colin could almost have been reading about math formulas. But occasionally there were quotes from victims: "Dr. Creekman's the reason my daddy got addicted, and the reason he overdosed. Dr. Creekman's the reason I didn't have a daddy to walk me down the aisle when I got married." And, "I thought doctors were supposed to heal people, not hurt them worse." And, "We trusted Dr. Creekman, because he seemed like such a nice man. He said he would make the pain go away. But he caused a million times more pain than he ever cured. And he did it all for money."

Colin felt his face flush with shame. *This* was his father? This was the person he'd been rejoicing about just an hour or so ago, because Colin had found a lock engraved with the words "For my beloved son" that he *thought* might have been from his father?

Colin scrolled down to another page of links. And what he saw there almost made him drop his phone:

NEW BOOK DISSECTS CRIMES OF DRUG-RING DOCTOR

BOOK ABOUT DRUG-DEALING DOCTOR HITS
BESTSELLER LIST

There's a whole book about what my dad did? Colin thought. And it sold so many copies, it was on some bestseller list?

The next headline down said “Best-Selling Book about Drug-Dealing Doctor Becomes Award-Winning Podcast.”

The dates on the stories about the “new” book and the newer podcast were at least seven years ago, but still. How many hundreds or thousands or maybe even millions of people knew what his father had done?

And how many people knew that he and Mom were connected to this awful Dr. Franklin Creekman?

Leila knows, he thought. And I just let Nevaeh see all the same links I was reading.

Maybe Nevaeh’s parents knew, too. There had always been something a little too . . . pitying . . . about the way Nevaeh’s dad looked at Colin.

Did Nevaeh’s sister and brothers know? Had they told the three teenagers Colin had come to consider his unofficial older brothers this summer, Deepak, Derek, and Daryl?

Colin flipped the blanket up over his face.

He and Mom would have to change their names again.

They’d have to move.

How else could Colin live with people knowing about his dad?

Nevaeh, Covering for Colin

“What did the three of you think of Carnegie Mellon’s campus?” Leila asked, passing a plateful of grilled chicken to Nevaeh.

Softball question, Nevaeh thought in relief. She settled in a bit more comfortably to her seat at Leila’s dining room table and placed a piece of chicken beside the mound of potato salad she’d already scooped onto her plate. She figured she wouldn’t have to answer at all, because Prilla and Roddy would go on and on about what they’d seen on their campus tour, and how much Prilla loved theater, and how interested Roddy was in whatever new physics idea had just occurred to him. Their answers would probably fill in more than enough time for Nevaeh to gulp down dinner and excuse herself and go back upstairs to Colin.

But Prilla said only, “It was nice,” and went back to staring down at her plate.

Roddy added, “Uh-huh,” and fell silent, too.

Nevaeh stared suspiciously at her older sister and brother. Prilla’s eyes were oddly pinkish, as if she’d gotten soap in them when she’d taken a shower after all their walking. Her hair was still wet, and she hadn’t even bothered to pull it back into a ponytail, as she normally would have.

Roddy’s usual dreamy expression was missing, too. His jaw was clenched so tightly, Nevaeh wasn’t sure he’d be able to open his mouth to put any food in.

What was wrong with them?

“Ah, I’d forgotten how reticent teenagers can be,” Leila murmured.

Nevaeh could guess that the word “reticent” meant something like “not talking.” She wanted to kick Roddy and Prilla under the table so they’d look at her and she could flash them a look that meant, *Since when do*

Greeveys not talk? But both Prilla and Roddy were at the other end of the table. If Nevaeh tried to kick anyone, her foot was more likely to connect with Leila's ankle or Mrs. Creedmont's leg by mistake.

"And what did you think?" Leila asked, turning to Nevaeh.

"Oh, um . . ." This was ridiculous. Nevaeh had family pride to uphold. "I liked all the weird sculptures all over the place. I liked the bridge with all the locks on it—"

No, no, no! Mayday!

How could Nevaeh have gotten herself in trouble so quickly? She should know better than to talk when she was distracted. She and Colin hadn't been anywhere near the Schenley Bridge with Prilla and Roddy. They'd only been there on their own.

She waited for either Prilla or Roddy—probably Prilla—to jerk her head up and say, *What are you talking about? What bridge? Did you sneak out of the library after you promised not to?*

But Prilla and Roddy both kept their heads bent over their plates. They lifted their forks and placed food in their mouths with all the emotion of robots.

They might as well have been in soundproof booths, for all the attention they paid Nevaeh.

It was Colin's mom who startled. She put her glass down so forcefully that the water sloshed back and forth like a tidal wave.

"They're still there?" she asked in a choked voice. "The locks?"

"Well, I guess," Nevaeh said, backpedaling. "I meant, I liked seeing them *online*. You know kids today, we see something online and sometimes we forget we haven't seen it in person. I saw there are bridges with locks like that in Paris, too. I'd love to go to Paris someday. Wouldn't you? Oh, wait—Leila, you seem like someone who's been to Paris. Have you?"

"Oh, yes," Leila said. "Many times. When my husband was alive, we'd take groups of students on trips to Europe just about every year."

Okay, now Prilla will ask a million questions about what countries they went to and how a college student could sign up for a trip like that, Nevaeh thought. *And how much live theater they got to see . . .*

But Prilla said nothing.

Roddy said nothing.

Mrs. Creedmont had a faraway, sorrowful look in her eye, as if she was still thinking about the locks on the Schenley Bridge and hadn't heard anything about Paris.

Leila angled her body toward Nevaeh.

"And what are *you* interested in studying when you get to college?" she asked, her dark eyes intent on Nevaeh's face.

Nevaeh was the youngest of five kids. She could remember a million times when one or the other of her parents said something like, "Okay, we've got to get Dalton and Axel to baseball practice, and Prilla has play rehearsal, and Roddy has robotics club, and—oh, wait. Who's going to take care of Nevaeh?" Sometimes she felt like she'd spent her entire life trying to get someone to pay attention exclusively to her.

But she did not want to be the center of attention now. All she wanted to do was gulp down the rest of her food and get back to Colin.

"I don't know," she blurted. Somehow she managed not to roll her eyes. "I'm *twelve*. I'm not thinking about college yet. At all."

Maybe she'd answered a little too loudly, because Colin's mom jolted back, as if awakened from her trance.

"You should," Mrs. Creedmont said. "If I'd started thinking about college when I was twelve, everything would have been different. If I'd seen the possibilities for myself, instead of relying on . . . on . . ."

Nevaeh was pretty sure the rest of that sentence was something about Colin's dad.

Nevaeh had to bite her tongue not to shout out, *You mean, you wouldn't have ended up marrying a criminal?*

But she couldn't betray Colin like that.

Or Mrs. Creedmont.

"You know what, though?" Prilla suddenly spoke up in an odd, prissy voice. "Not everyone is college material. Not everyone has the money. Not everyone has the *guts*."

"And not everyone is very smart," Roddy said.

"What? How dare you!" Prilla cried.

What was happening?

Nevaeh dropped her fork and shoved her chair back from the table. She really wanted to run upstairs and be like Colin: cowering in bed. Hiding from everything bad. Or, no—she wanted to run all the way back to Groveview and hide in her own room, in her own bed.

That wasn't possible.

Anyhow, if she ran away, what might Prilla and Roddy say or do next? Everyone was looking at her.

"Excuse me," Nevaeh said. "My brother and sister and me, we need to talk. Outside."

She went over and grabbed Prilla's right arm and Roddy's left arm and tugged. Both of them were bigger and stronger than her, and either of them easily could have resisted. But they both stood up and went along with her.

When they got to the sliding glass door out to the deck, Roddy complained, "It's raining."

"Greeveys don't melt," Nevaeh said.

It was really only misting—one of those light summer rains whose droplets seemed to evaporate in the heat as soon as they landed. But all three of them hovered under the overhang from the roof when they stepped outside.

Nevaeh shut the door behind them.

"What is wrong with the two of you?" she demanded. "Why are you acting like, like . . ."

"He ruined everything," Prilla complained.

"Me?" Roddy said. "She started it!"

"What are you—toddlers?" Nevaeh asked. Unbidden, tears welled in her eyes.

"Oh, come on, Nevaeh," Prilla said, sounding more like herself. "You've seen us fight before."

"Not in front of strangers," Nevaeh said.

Roddy ran his hand over his hair—and, once again, looked a little shocked to find hair there, not a shaved scalp.

"She's right," he admitted. "Mom and Dad would be ashamed of us."

"You go back in and apologize, then," Prilla said.

"No, you," Roddy said. "You were the one who was rude at the dinner table."

"Because you said I wasn't smart."

"You said I didn't have guts!"

"Actually," Nevaeh interrupted, "neither one of you used anyone's name. You just said, 'not everyone.' So—"

She broke off because there was a sound at the side of the house, a door opening. She heard Leila call out, "No, no, it's okay. You go now while you

have the chance to do that alone. I understand.”

It sounded like the door closed again. Nevaeh heard hesitant footsteps, then Mrs. Creedmont calling back softly, “Oh, wait—your car blocked me in. . . . Oh, never mind. I’ll walk.”

Now the footsteps seemed to be heading toward the street.

Nevaeh tiptoed over to the corner of the house and peeked around it. Mrs. Creedmont had reached the front edge of Leila’s tiny yard and was turning onto the sidewalk leading downhill.

Nevaeh went back to Roddy and Prilla.

“Mrs. Creedmont shouldn’t walk around on her own at night,” she told them. “We should follow her.”

Prilla raised an eyebrow.

“Are you worried about Mrs. Creedmont being safe on her own, or are you trying to find out where she’s going?” she asked.

“Maybe . . . both?” Nevaeh said.

Roddy looked back and forth between Nevaeh and Prilla.

“What are you two up to?” he asked.

“Come on, Roddy,” Prilla said. “It won’t hurt anything if we follow a block or so behind her. I mean, Mrs. Creedmont herself said *we* had to stick together, walking around Pittsburgh. And that was during the day!” She flashed a bright smile, as if she’d forgotten her argument with Roddy. Or nearly forgotten it, anyway. “It’ll be a Greevey adventure!”

That was an expression that dated back to when their older brothers, Axel and Dalton, were little kids. Nevaeh didn’t even know what had started it, but now it was what any of the Greevey kids said when they were trying to convince each other to do something risky.

“Are you kidding me? After all the walking we *already* did today?” Roddy asked.

But he was already heading toward the stairs that led down from the deck to the backyard.

Nevaeh and Prilla joined him. Together, all three of them walked through the dark backyard and circled around the house toward the street.

Mrs. Creedmont was just a dark figure ahead of them, walking fast.

She didn’t look back.

Because she thinks Colin is sound asleep, and we Greeveys are still arguing on the deck, Nevaeh thought.

Mrs. Creedmont turned a corner. Then another. The three Greeveys stayed a good distance behind, but kept her in sight. At first, they were still in a quiet residential area, where people had been driven inside by the rain or the heat. But soon they reached an area with shops and restaurants and crowded sidewalks. Even if Mrs. Creedmont looked back now, she wouldn't see them.

She wouldn't be able to hear them, either.

"What started your fight, anyhow?" Nevaeh asked.

Prilla sighed. She seemed to have cooled off, walking down the hill.

"Roddy's acting crazy," she said. "He thinks I laughed at him."

"It was right at the beginning of the campus tour, when that pompous jerk said that thing about Einstein," Roddy said. "I don't mind strangers laughing at me, but my own sister joining in . . . my own *twin* . . ."

"I told you, I wasn't laughing!" Prilla protested. She was quiet for a minute. Her shoes squeaked on the wet pavement. "Or, if I did, it wasn't about you. It was nerves."

"You're an actor!" Roddy protested. "You know how to act like you're not nervous!"

"On stage, maybe," Prilla said. "But not when . . . when something I want seems impossible." She gulped and said in a small voice, "Maybe I'm not actually college material."

"Of course you are!" Nevaeh protested. "You can be anything you want! You're Prilla Greevey!"

"Sarsparilla Greevey, actually," Prilla said.

That truly was Prilla's real name. When Nevaeh was little, she'd thought it was the most beautiful name ever, and she was jealous. Now she thought she was lucky Prilla had been born first, and Mom and Dad hadn't saved that mouthful for Nevaeh.

"Did someone make fun of your name?" Nevaeh demanded. She stopped in her tracks and balled up her fists. "What was it with those kids who were on that college tour with you? You should have told me this afternoon, and I would have . . . I don't know. Maybe I'd have done one of those routines you see in the movies, where someone pretends to trip and spills a whole milkshake on someone. Or, no, that'd be a waste of a good milkshake. Maybe orange soda? That stains. I know."

"Nobody made fun of my name," Prilla said softly. "It was just . . . I was standing there thinking how amazing everything looked, and how

much I would love to go somewhere completely different for college—somewhere that’s not Groveview, somewhere that’s not Ohio. Carnegie Mellon seemed like paradise. And I’d managed not to sound like an idiot, talking to the kid next to me about absurdist theater—do you know how many people in Groveview even know what absurdist theater *is*? And then that guy was so mean to Roddy, and other kids laughed, and I remembered that I hadn’t gone to a private high school like the kid next to me, and I wasn’t wearing designer clothes like the three other girls in our group, and . . . and, Roddy, you know when they laughed at you, it felt like they were laughing at me, too.”

“Okay, then,” Roddy said.

“Well, they’re just stupid,” Nevaeh said. “Who needs Carnegie Mellon and its stupid students, anyway?”

“It wasn’t even current students who laughed at me,” Roddy said. “It was just kids who *want* to go there.”

“Well, then, I’m going to write to the admissions office and tell them not to let those kids in,” Nevaeh said.

Prilla slung her arm around Nevaeh’s shoulders.

“Kiddo, I admire your loyalty, but you need to work on your revenge plans,” Prilla said. “You don’t even know those kids’ names.”

“Baby Greevey, our secret weapon,” Roddy said, patting her back. He was the only person in the whole world who was allowed to call Nevaeh “Baby Greevey.”

The fight between Prilla and Roddy was over. Nevaeh knew Colin was still huddled on a bed in Leila’s house, all anxious and upset about finding out his father was a criminal. She could see Mrs. Creedmont ahead of her, tiptoeing furtively toward who-knew-where. For that matter, Nevaeh knew Mom was still in pain, back home in Groveview, and her accident was still Nevaeh’s fault. And Nevaeh still needed to apologize. But with Prilla and Roddy on either side of her, Nevaeh felt like she was traveling in a little bubble of safety. Of contented Greevey-ness. Their sneakers slapped on the wet sidewalks, the three of them walking almost completely in step. Someone opened the door of some restaurant—or maybe it was a bar—and a burst of laughter and dance music spilled out into the street.

Ahead of them, Mrs. Creedmont turned another corner, and . . . was that a dinosaur up ahead?

“Oh, I know where we are!” Prilla said. “That’s the Carnegie Museums complex.”

“You can tell just from seeing a dinosaur sculpture?” Nevaeh asked. Pittsburgh seemed to have sculptures all over the place. “Did you *study* for this trip?”

“Maybe,” Prilla said.

Mrs. Creedmont was walking faster, going past dark buildings. She cut down an alleyway, and Nevaeh, Prilla, and Roddy waited until she was past a heavy clump of shrubs before they followed.

So when they came out of the alley, Mrs. Creedmont was already stepping out onto a bridge—the Schenley Bridge. She walked briskly to the center, then stood peering up at the locks arrayed on the chain-link fence.

“It’s my fault she’s here,” Nevaeh gasped. “Because I said something about the locks on that bridge. I reminded her . . .”

Nevaeh, Prilla, and Roddy stayed in the shadows off to the side. Mrs. Creedmont reached up to a small, dark shape silhouetted against the chain-link fence. Nevaeh wasn’t close enough to see, exactly, but it had to be the same rusty lock that Nevaeh and Colin had taken off and looked in and then reattached to the bridge that very afternoon. It was in the right place.

Does she see the words “For Colin”? Nevaeh wondered. They were etched so faintly into the rust, and the streetlights weren’t terribly bright by that section of the bridge. But who would Mrs. Creedmont think had left those words there?

“Does she have a key?” Prilla whispered. “From, like, fifteen years ago? Oooh—this is so dramatic. But I kind of feel like it’s not our business.”

Mrs. Creedmont drew out something from her rain jacket. It looked like a big pair of pliers. Or maybe hedge trimmers.

“She has bolt cutters?” Roddy said. “Nobody carries bolt cutters around just out of habit. She planned this.”

“Is *this* why she wanted to come to Pittsburgh in the first place?” Prilla asked.

Mrs. Creedmont angled the bolt cutters against the lock and smashed the handles together.

The lock fell to the sidewalk with a resounding thud.

Mrs. Creedmont bent down and scooped up the lock. She held it gingerly, at a distance, the way someone might carry a dead rat. She walked toward a trash can at the end of the bridge.

“Come on—we shouldn’t be watching this,” Prilla said. “Let’s go back before she sees us.”

Prilla and Roddy each took a step back. But Nevaeh couldn’t stop watching. The heart lock—now a *broken* heart lock—swung in Mrs. Creedmont’s hand. Nevaeh remembered the words written inside: “Felicia and Franklin . . . Our love will last forever.” She remembered the hope written across Colin’s face when he’d found the lock—and when he’d seen his own name etched on the outside. Etched *recently*.

Nevaeh could see what was about to happen. Mrs. Creedmont swung her arm back, as if preparing to toss the rusty, broken heart lock into the trash.

But the heart lock had Colin’s name written on it, whether Mrs. Creedmont had noticed or not. That meant the heart didn’t belong to Mrs. Creedmont anymore. It belonged to Colin.

Mrs. Creedmont drew even with the trash can. She lifted her hand, clearly ready to let go.

Nevaeh stepped out of the shadows.

“No—stop!” she called. “You can’t do that!”

23

Colin, Deciding

Colin held his phone close to his face, still covered by the blanket. He typed a text to his mom:

Did you ever read the book about my dad? Or listen to the podcast?

Would you ever let me do that?

The cursor blinked at him, again and again and again, waiting for him to hit Send.

He erased the entire message.

Mom would say no.

Mom would say, *I can't talk about this right now.*

He started another search on his phone. Leila's Wi-Fi was fast. He could download every single one of the podcast episodes and listen whenever he wanted.

He didn't need his mother's permission.

He couldn't be the only person left who didn't know everything.

24

Nevaeh Talks

“Nevaeh?” Mrs. Creedmont gasped. She didn’t let go of the broken heart lock. But she kept her hand near the trash can. “What are you doing here? Especially alone?”

Prilla and Roddy sheepishly stepped out from the shadows.

“We saw you leaving, and we were worried about you wandering around in the dark all by yourself,” Roddy said. “Because you said it wasn’t safe for *us* unless we stuck together.”

Nevaeh was glad he’d answered, because he was the only one who could sound so innocent. She or Prilla wouldn’t have been able to avoid sounding nosy.

“Oh. Well, it’s kind of you to be concerned,” Mrs. Creedmont said. She shook back her dark hair, flinging off droplets from the mist. They caught in the light from the streetlamps over the bridge. It almost looked like she had a halo. Or as if she just wasn’t real. “But this area of Pittsburgh really is safe. And I do remember all my surviving-in-a-city skills.” She drew back her hand—the one holding the broken heart lock—and pressed her arm against her side, hiding the heart. It was almost as though she hoped none of them had seen it. Or as though she wanted to tell herself Nevaeh had been shouting about something else. “And . . . after that big meal, I just needed a little walk. To clear my head.”

Seriously? Nevaeh thought. *She thinks we’re all going to go along with her pretending that that heart lock isn’t a big deal? And that she didn’t walk all the way over here just to cut it down?*

“I guess we should all walk back together,” Mrs. Creedmont said, with what was probably supposed to look like a carefree shrug. “We can see if

Colin is going to wake up and eat or if he's going to sleep through the night and be starving in the morning."

She turned toward the three Greevey kids, even as she slid a hand inside her rain jacket. She made the motion look casual, but Nevaeh was pretty sure she was tucking the bolt cutters into some interior pocket.

Was she hiding the broken heart lock, too?

Was she just going to throw it away somewhere else?

Nevaeh hadn't managed to stop anything.

Not yet, anyway.

"I . . . Is there something written on that lock you just cut off the bridge?" Nevaeh asked weakly. "Something important that maybe you should look at a little more closely?"

Mrs. Creedmont had started crossing the street toward the three Greeveys, but her step faltered. For a moment, she stood frozen in the middle of the bridge. Then she walked quickly toward the nearest streetlight. She pulled the broken heart lock back out and peered down at it.

Mrs. Creedmont's posture stiffened suddenly. Nevaeh was pretty sure that had to be the exact instant when Mrs. Creedmont saw the words "For Colin" carved into the rust. But Mrs. Creedmont didn't look up or say anything right away. Instead, she pulled the broken section of the lock back and flipped open the front panel. She didn't unfurl the paper inside—it seemed like she was only checking to make sure it was still there. She slammed the lock closed again.

"How . . ." she began. "Did Colin write his own name on this lock? How did he know it was here? And who it belonged to? Did he see inside?"

"Nevaeh, what's going on?" Prilla asked. "How do you know anything about some random lock on a bridge?"

"Um . . ." Nevaeh said.

Me and my big mouth, she thought.

Had she just betrayed Colin's secrets?

She had. She hadn't meant to, but she had.

Mrs. Creedmont sagged back against the lamppost behind her.

"Of course he didn't see inside," she muttered, shaking her head. "He wouldn't have had a key." It almost seemed as though she was talking to herself, not Nevaeh. "But for him to have known anything about this . . ."

She raised her head and peered straight at Nevaeh.

“Nevaeh, you have to tell me what Colin knows.”

Nevaeh gulped.

But to her surprise, Roddy stepped out in front of her.

“With all due respect, Mrs. Creedmont, I think you need to ask Colin that,” Roddy said. “Not Nevaeh.”

His voice was gentle but firm. Roddy looked like he always did, so similar to all the other Greeveys—with the same blondish-brown hair, the same prone-to-freckling skin, the same muscular frame after the summer of hard work. But he seemed to be standing up straighter than usual. Away from Axel and Dalton and Dad always bossing him around—and, for that matter, with Prilla and Nevaeh both too flabbergasted to tease him—he seemed like a different person.

Nevaeh gaped at her brother, and Prilla was beside her doing the same thing.

Mrs. Creedmont didn’t answer Roddy, but pulled out her phone and began typing intently.

“Uh . . . are you texting Colin now?” Nevaeh asked. “Aren’t you adults always telling us kids some conversations are better in person, not over text?”

She needed to get to Colin before he talked to his mom. She had to explain that she hadn’t betrayed him on purpose.

What if he never spoke to her again because of this?

Mrs. Creedmont looked up.

“I’m not texting him,” she said. “I’m calling an Uber. Because Roddy’s right. I do need to talk with Colin. Immediately.”

“Good,” Nevaeh said, with confidence she didn’t feel. “That’s what Colin wants.”

Prilla glanced over at Nevaeh as if she could read her mind. As if she could tell that Nevaeh was thinking, *But it’s not what’s best for me.*

Colin's Mom Talks

Podcasts were the greatest thing ever.

Or maybe they were the worst.

Colin was still huddled under a blanket in the guest room of a stranger's house in a strange city. He hadn't summoned the nerve or the energy to leave the bed—not even to get up and find his earbuds. He was just listening to everything set on the lowest volume possible, the phone pressed against his ear. But he'd already heard the first episode, which told about three different people—a teenage girl, a college football player who thought he had a shot at the NFL, and a grandmother who knit blankets for premature babies—whose lives Colin's father had supposedly ruined. Because Colin's dad had prescribed them drugs they shouldn't have had. And he'd kept prescribing them those drugs as long as they could pay, even when there was no medical reason for them to need painkillers.

Even though the drugs he prescribed turned them into addicts.

Every word hurt. Every word drove home the point “This was a bad doctor. This was a bad man.”

But Colin couldn't stop listening.

His phone dinged with texts from Nevaeh, but Colin silenced them without glancing at them.

He was too ashamed, too horrified.

No wonder Mom changed our names, he thought. No wonder she didn't want me to know any of this.

But he couldn't turn it off.

He started the second episode, which went back and told about young, newly minted Dr. Franklin Creekman arriving in tiny Eberly, Kentucky, thanks to a program that was supposed to forgive doctors' medical school

debt if they opened practices in Appalachia. The podcaster had just said, “Dr. Creekman and his wife moved into an old Victorian house in the center of town . . .” when Colin heard footsteps on creaky stairs.

Except, the sound wasn’t coming from the podcast.

The footsteps were right outside the bedroom door. They were real.

Quickly, Colin stopped the podcast and shoved the phone under the blanket, just as the bedroom door began to swing open.

Oh, no! Did anyone see me hiding the phone?

He turned his motion into a roll to the right and added an unconvincing half snore. Wouldn’t that make it seem like he was only turning in his sleep? He opened one eye just a crack, to see if it was Nevaeh or his mom coming to check on him.

Even if it’s Nevaeh, maybe I should keep pretending to be asleep. Because I don’t want to talk about what I found out. I don’t want her to know anything else. . . .

That was ridiculous. Now that Nevaeh knew Colin’s father’s real name, she could look up anything she wanted. She could download and listen to the podcast about Dr. Franklin Creekman’s crimes, too.

“I know you’re awake.” This was his mom’s voice. “Colin, I’ve been able to see through your fake-sleeping since you were three.”

Had she known he was pretending before?

What changed, that she wouldn’t let him go on pretending?

Something hard and heavy landed on the blanket over his torso. Involuntarily, Colin reached for it. He felt rust and water droplets. He opened his eyes.

The heart lock he’d seen on the bridge earlier that day sagged from his hand.

Was there a second key? he wondered. Or did Nevaeh give Mom my key? Did she tell Mom everything?

He felt a surge of anger at both Mom and Nevaeh before noticing that the arched metal part of the lock had been cut somehow, not opened with a key. The break in the metal was sheared off, leaving a sharp edge.

“Apparently this is yours now,” Mom said, her voice equally sharp. “The last time I saw it, it didn’t say ‘For Colin.’ And . . . the last time I saw it, you didn’t exist yet.”

Mom sat down on the edge of the bed. Colin didn’t have a chance to brace himself, and he rolled toward her. For a moment, Colin feared she

would push him away.

But she surprised him by leaning back on the pillow alongside him and hugging him close. The lock slipped down between them. Mom closed her hand over Colin's, so they were both holding on to the heart section of the lock, not the broken part.

"The last time I saw this lock, it was fresh and shiny and new, and you were just a dream your father and I had for the future," Mom said, smoothing Colin's hair back from his forehead. "And we were so, so very happy."

"Happy?" Colin croaked. He made it sound like a word he'd never heard before, a word he didn't understand.

"Happy," Mom repeated. She put a finger on Colin's chin, lifting it so Colin had little choice but to look her in the eye. "Colin, I think I made a mistake."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You shouldn't have married Dad, because he was a bad person," Colin muttered bitterly. He jerked his head back down to stare at the broken heart lock.

"No," Mom said. "That's not what I mean."

She didn't react the way she usually did anytime Colin said the word "Dad." Mom's voice still throbbed with pain—that hadn't changed. But now it was wistful pain, nostalgic pain. Vulnerable pain.

It wasn't the rigid fury that always felt like a door slammed in Colin's face.

"Tell me," Colin whispered. "Explain."

For a moment, Mom only stroked his hair, smoothing down his wayward curls.

"I should have let you know . . . about the times we were happy together," she whispered. "Being back in Pittsburgh has reminded me. Before . . . everything happened . . . we were so much in love. And when you were born, we were both so delighted to be parents."

Colin caught his breath, remembering the pictures he'd seen in the mysterious storage unit. Mom was saying those pictures weren't a lie. They weren't just a pose for the camera.

Mom was saying she wasn't the only one who'd loved and adored baby Colin.

His father truly had loved him, too.

Hot tears crowded into Colin's eyes, and he choked back a sob.

“You could have told me that anytime in the past twelve years,” he moaned. “It would have meant . . .”

He wanted to say, *so much to me*, but it was more than that. Maybe it would have meant that, on the first day of kindergarten, Colin wouldn’t have stood apart from all the kids gathered on the playground, everyone else making friends while he tried to make himself invisible. Maybe it would have meant that when his teachers asked questions in class, Colin would have been the first to raise his hand with the answer. Maybe it would have meant that, when he started working with Mom and Deepak, Daryl, and Derek this summer, Colin would have been able to join in all the older boys’ jokes from the very beginning; he would have been just as comfortable in his own skin as they were.

Then Colin remembered that, regardless of what he knew or didn’t know, his parents had fallen out of love. His father had become a criminal and gotten caught and gone to prison.

And his mother had run away. She’d changed their names. She’d hidden in Groveview and worked long hours and mostly pretended that Colin’s father hadn’t existed.

Colin hadn’t had a choice in any of it.

Mom kept stroking his hair, her touch so gentle. So careful.

“Shh, shh, shh,” she said. “I’m telling you now—I was wrong. But I was always so scared. Scared that if I told you even one nice thing about your father, you’d think, you’d think . . . that we could go back. That you could have a father again.”

It took a moment for Mom’s words to sink in. Even the simplest words—*you, we, scared*—felt foreign to Colin’s ears, as if they were in a different language, and he had to think deeply about whether he understood them or not.

“But now that he’s dead . . .” Mom whispered.

Colin pulled his hand away from Mom’s. He sat up straight, clutching the broken heart lock.

“Oh, so you mean now that he’s dead and there’s no chance I’ll ever meet him—no chance I’ll ever get to experience anything good about having a father, no chance we’ll ever get to know each other—that means *now* it’s okay to tell me, ‘Guess what? He wasn’t all bad’?” Colin demanded. “That’s not fair!”

Mom jerked back as if Colin's words were weapons. But she kept her gaze steady on Colin's face.

"Nothing about what happened to us—or, or the other people he hurt—none of that was fair," Mom said evenly. "And him dying so suddenly, at such a young age, that wasn't fair, either. I'd always imagined telling you everything when you were an adult, letting you make your own decisions then. When you were mature and your brain was fully formed, and you were your own person, and . . ."

The other people he hurt . . . Colin thought. Mom meant the victims of Dad's crimes. The people Colin had just found out about.

It almost felt like Mom was inviting him to ask questions—like she finally wanted to talk. If he hadn't just read and listened to all those horrible details about his father, Colin would have immediately demanded, *Since Dad is dead and there aren't any more decisions to make, tell me everything now. I'm mature enough. What did Dad do?*

But Colin didn't have it in him to pretend to be hearing all the horrible details for the first time.

And he couldn't talk about what he'd just found out. He couldn't.

Colin shifted the broken heart lock from one hand to the other. And that made Mom look down at the heart again.

"You didn't seem surprised to see that lock," she said. "You didn't ask me, 'What is this?' or 'Why does this have my name on it?' Or, 'What's inside?' How did you know that lock was on that bridge, Colin? And why did you put your name on it? Were you trying to torture me with guilt?"

"I didn't put my name on it!" Colin protested. "It was already like that when Nevaeh and I found it."

Mom's eyes got wide. She snatched the heart lock from Colin's hands. She brushed back flakes of rust and traced the roughly etched words "For Colin."

"If you didn't write this, who did?" she asked.

"Maybe . . . Dad?" Colin suggested. In spite of everything he'd just heard about his father's crimes, he could still see the image in his head of his father hugging him as a baby. He could picture that version of his dad walking across Schenley Bridge, pausing in the middle, and reaching up to put Colin's name on the lock. And then adding the second lock, the one that said "For my beloved son."

The one that Colin still hadn't opened. The one he'd hidden in his duffel bag, because he didn't want Mom to see it.

But maybe now . . .

Mom dropped the heart lock.

"Why would your father have done that?" she asked. "It doesn't make sense! Why would he have thought you'd ever be in Pittsburgh? Or see this lock? Unless . . . if . . . if someone else wanted you to think that . . . and wanted me to think that . . ."

Now her gaze darted frantically around the room. She could have been looking for bogeymen in every corner.

"Mom! Calm down!" Colin pleaded. "He sent me a key. Or, well, somebody did that for him . . ."

He explained about the box on the porch at dawn. He told her about the Post-it Note on top of the shoebox, holding the words *Your father wanted you to have this*. He didn't even get to the part about visiting the storage unit and finding the second key there. Because with every word Colin spoke, his mother's face got harder and harder, angrier and angrier.

"Mom, it was a good thing to get that key," he protested. "It helped me understand—"

"Understand what?" Mom asked. "Colin, you don't understand anything. Not if you could get a key in a box from some unknown person, and you *didn't* think you were being played." She winced. "Though, maybe I've made the same kind of mistake . . ."

"What are you talking about?" Colin asked.

Mom pressed her hands to her face.

"What if I've put us both in danger?" she asked. "What if I've put everyone in danger?"

Sudden Changes

Everything happened fast.

One minute Nevaeh was sitting with Prilla, Roddy, and Leila, having a second go-round of dinner (because they'd all been too upset to eat much the first time, and Leila just brought out all the leftovers as if it was perfectly normal to eat part of a meal, go away in a tizzy, and then come back and eat the rest of it). Leila was telling stories about unusual students she'd lived with, and Prilla, Roddy, and Nevaeh were telling about weird things they'd found cleaning out houses with their dad's business. And all of them were laughing so, so hard, and Nevaeh was proud that Prilla and Roddy could be so funny, and she thought Leila was great, too. The longer it took for Colin or his mom to come back down the stairs, the more Nevaeh thought, *Oh, good. They're really talking about his dad for once. They're working out everything. It's all going to be okay. And . . . Colin's not going to be mad at me, either.*

And the next moment, Mrs. Creedmont was rushing down the stairs with Colin trailing behind her. Just the sound of Mrs. Creedmont's heels clattering against the steps made Leila break off in the middle of a story about a student who ate nothing but oatmeal. And when both Colin and his mom rounded the corner into the dining room, Colin's face was white and terrified looking, and Mrs. Creedmont looked like someone only pretending to be calm.

"I'm so sorry—so very, very sorry," Mrs. Creedmont said. "Something just came up, and we have to go home."

"Now?" Nevaeh gasped.

Around the table, Prilla and Roddy and Leila looked as aghast as Nevaeh felt. Prilla and Roddy called out, "What?" and "Why?" But the

only question Mrs. Creedmont answered was Nevaeh's.

"We'll go as soon as possible," she said. "As soon as we can pack up and load the car."

"Felicia, it's ten o'clock at night," Leila pointed out. "It would be one or two a.m. before you got back to Groveview. Surely, whatever is going on, you'd be safer getting a good night's sleep and leaving first thing in the morning."

"No." Mrs. Creedmont shook her head emphatically. "Kids—hurry. Go get your bags." Then she grimaced. "But, Leila . . . could I talk to you privately?"

Mrs. Creedmont and Leila stepped into the living room and pulled the door shut. Nevaeh waited for Prilla and Roddy to head for the stairs, then she rushed over to Colin.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Mom's freaking out." Colin kept his head down. Nevaeh had never seen him so cowed. "She thinks the box I found on the porch . . . the box with the key . . . She's acting like it was all fake. Like some catfishing scheme."

"Catfishing?" Nevaeh remembered Prilla warning about that in her "Now that you have a phone, you have to be careful" lectures. "But that's when someone uses a fake identity *online*. And it's, like, usually some fake *romantic* message. You didn't get the key online. And it wasn't from anybody trying to date anybody. Right?"

"Mom didn't tell me enough to know what to think," Colin said.

Nevaeh gritted her teeth. Then, because Colin was just standing there frozen, she stepped over to the door to the living room and pressed her ear against the wood.

Dimly, she heard Mrs. Creedmont saying on the other side of the door, ". . . if I can't even trust the attorney?"

Leila's reply was so soft and soothing, Nevaeh could barely make out the words: "After what you've been through, I can see why you have trouble trusting anyone. But Franklin is dead, and everything else that happened was more than a decade ago."

"All the people who suspected me because of Frank are still out there, and I'm sure they still want . . ." Mrs. Creedmont's voice dropped too low to be heard before soaring in distress again. "If they know where I live, if they know I'm here this weekend . . ."

“But you’ve made it clear you had nothing to do with Franklin’s crimes,” Leila argued. “They’ve got no reason to harm you now. And why would anybody want to hurt me, just because I’m your friend?”

“Bystanders get hurt sometimes, too,” Mrs. Creedmont said bitterly. “Believe me, I know.”

“I’m willing to take that risk,” Leila said. “Because, Felicia, there’s also a risk to cutting off friendships. To never letting yourself be anything but alone.”

Nevaeh heard a muffled sound that could have been a sob. Then she heard footsteps and darted away from the door and toward the stairs.

Only about fifteen minutes later, the three Greeveys and Colin and his mom were all back in Mrs. Creedmont’s SUV. Leila pulled her car out so that Mrs. Creedmont could get past her, and she waved as they left. A heavy silence hung in the SUV as they drove down the same streets they’d all walked along earlier in the day.

Nevaeh was smashed between Colin and Roddy again. Each of them had their phones angled away from her as though they didn’t trust her to see their screens. In the front, both Mrs. Creedmont and Prilla stayed quiet.

Nevaeh texted Colin: **Want to talk? By text, I mean?**

She saw him pause whatever he was listening to on his phone. Without meeting her eyes, he shook his head.

“Not right now,” he whispered. “Sorry.”

A car veered into Mrs. Creedmont’s lane, and she had to brake hard. Or maybe whatever happened had actually been Mrs. Creedmont’s fault, because Prilla looked up from her phone and said, “You know, if you start feeling like you’re too tired to drive, Roddy or I can take over. It’s basically a teenager superpower, that we never get sleepy staying up late.”

“I wouldn’t be able to sleep even if I wasn’t driving,” Mrs. Creedmont said in such a despairing voice that even Prilla gave up.

Nevaeh was not used to sitting in a car with four other people and nobody talking. How was she supposed to stand this for three more hours?

She peered down at her own phone, but it didn’t appeal to her like it usually did. She could have looked up more awful information about Colin’s dad, but it already felt like she knew as much about him as she wanted. Why depress herself further?

She began typing on her phone, but it wasn't a text to Colin. It wasn't even notes for what she needed to say to apologize to her mom when they got home. It was what she wished she could say to Colin's dad:

It's not fair! You're dead, and you're STILL ruining things for Colin and his mom. And their friends.

But then she erased that, because she didn't want Colin to see what she'd written. She didn't want him to think she was really only concerned about herself.

Am I like Leila, just a bystander? she wondered. *Or is there anything at all I can do to help?*

Colin Connects the Dots

Danger, Colin thought, peering out the window at the dark sky over the Pennsylvania countryside. *Mom thinks we're in danger.*

If it was too dangerous to stay at Leila's house overnight, was it dangerous just driving down the highway?

Would it be dangerous to be back in Groveview? After all, whoever had sent him the key had known their home address.

What if Mom made them move?

What if she decided they had to start over again in a new town, with new names?

Until this summer, Colin hadn't really cared where they lived. But now he felt like he *belonged* in Groveview. He had friends there—good friends. He'd ridden his bike down pretty much every street in the downtown area. He'd met Nevaeh at the Groveview library again and again and again, and he'd probably spent more time in the library's Genealogy and Local History section than anyone else in town under the age of eighty. He and Nevaeh had solved mysteries together about people who'd lived there as long ago as the 1930s. And, to go from the past to the future, he'd babysat the infant Torres twins with Nevaeh, and he kind of wanted to see what they were going to be like as they grew up.

He wanted to graduate from Groveview High School someday, just like everyone in Nevaeh's family going back decades. Maybe even centuries.

He started typing a text to Nevaeh: **I can't**

He erased that and tried again: **I won't**

Erase, erase, erase.

He heard Prilla in the front seat asking Mom, "Hey, don't you want to leave your GPS on? Just in case there's a detour or something? Or, you

know, it can let you know about speed traps.”

“No, there are dead zones out here where the cell service doesn’t work,” Mom replied. “It’ll run down the battery on my phone, all that searching for a signal. Actually, I’d suggest everyone turn your phone off, or put it on airplane mode. Just to keep your battery alive. Colin, did you hear me?”

Colin waited for someone else to say, *What are you talking about? All you have to do is plug in your phone, and the battery’s fine!* But Prilla said, “Okay,” and Roddy mumbled an “Uh-huh.” And Nevaeh whispered in Colin’s ear, “Is this like in a spy movie? Is your mom worried that someone can trace our phones?”

Colin gave a shrug that Nevaeh might not have been able to see in the dark. He muttered, “I don’t know anything.” He closed his eyes, but that didn’t help. He couldn’t stop thinking.

What’s Mom so afraid of?

What if she’s right to be so scared?

The edge of his phone cut into his hand. He was gripping it too tightly. But maybe it held the answers he wanted?

He went back to listening to the podcast he’d downloaded about his dad.

The second episode made it sound like his mom and dad had been happy in Eberly, Kentucky, just like they’d been in Pittsburgh. People invited them to family dinners after church on Sunday. When Mom got pregnant, some of Dad’s patients threw her a baby shower. At least six elderly women told Mom something like, “Since your own mama’s passed on, *I’m* happy to step in as an honorary mamaw. I reckon that’s going to be the best-loved baby in town!”

Colin had to hit Pause for a moment, thinking of all the honorary grandmothers he might have had.

Instead, he’d had no family but Mom.

All those old ladies would have been annoying, he told himself. They would have pinched my cheeks and made me eat candy that smelled like mothballs. I would have hated them.

Colin had to tell himself that, to go on to the third episode.

This one was about Colin’s dad becoming best friends with Otis Flood, the local pharmacist. The podcaster said Otis Flood was twenty years older than Dad, but the two of them had the same sense of humor. They both

loved fly-fishing. Most weekdays, they could both be found at noon at the local diner, both of them enjoying the same special of the day—meatloaf on Mondays, fried perch on Fridays. Otis Flood had three teenage daughters, but he started referring to Colin's father as "the son I never had."

So it didn't seem unusual to anyone when Dad told his patients, "Make sure you go to Otis to get that prescription filled. Don't let me hear you went to CVS or Walgreens!"

When out-of-towners started driving out of their way to Eberly to visit Dr. Creekman's practice or Otis Flood's pharmacy, at first the other residents were proud. One of the elderly women who'd offered to be Colin's honorary grandmother said she thought, "Well, lookee there! Even those big-city types in their fancy cars can see that we've got things good here in Eberly!"

Then the Eberly police department—which consisted of only two officers—started noticing a rash of burglaries. Why would big-city types in fancy cars come to Eberly to steal the family silver from every house on Main Street? Why was the Eberly pawn shop suddenly doing such a good business?

Could it have anything to do with Dr. Creekman and Otis Flood preferring payments in cash?

People began whispering about all the drug addicts in town. They began whispering about overdoses.

And deaths.

At first, people blamed out-of-town drug dealers. There was a town meeting where one person after another said those out-of-town drug dealers were ruining Eberly and then driving away, disappearing with their profits without ever seeing any of the consequences. Then one of the addicts' mothers stood up and said, "I don't know where Adeline got all her drugs. But it started when she broke her leg playing basketball, and that Dr. Creekman prescribed enough oxycodone to choke a horse!"

That was the beginning of the end. Eventually all the people who had loved Dr. Creekman and his wife started hating him. When Dr. Creekman and Otis Flood were arrested, Otis Flood was offered a way out: If he testified against Dr. Creekman, he would barely have to serve any prison time at all. He could be back home with his family in time to watch all three of his daughters graduate from high school.

Otis Flood was a local guy. The people of Eberly eventually forgave him.

But they never stopped hating Dr. Creekman.

So is that who Mom's afraid of? Colin wondered. *All those people from that little town in Kentucky where she only lived for three years? Does she think they still want to take revenge?*

Didn't they know Colin's father was already dead?

Colin squirmed in his seat. He wished he could reach back into his duffel bag and pull out the "For my beloved son" lock. But not to cradle it in his hands like he had before. After listening to the podcast about his dad, Colin just wanted to throw the lock out the window.

Colin had no desire to be that horrible man's "beloved" son.

But of course Colin couldn't reach his duffel bag, which was on the bottom of the pile in the back of the SUV.

And of course he wouldn't have actually thrown the lock out the window and risked hitting some other car.

I'm not that much like my father, he thought. *I do care about other people.*

It was something to hold on to, something he was certain of.

But am I like my mother, always running away? Am I that scared?

Should he be?

The dark miles kept scrolling past. Eventually Colin dozed off, even with the podcast whispering its horrible story into his ear. When he woke up, his phone was dead, and they were at the Greeveys' house. Prilla and Roddy were slipping quietly out of the car. Nevaeh leaned toward Colin.

"Text me as soon as you wake up tomorrow, okay?" she whispered, under the guise of acting like she was just drowsily raising her head. "We'll figure out what to do next."

"Right, right . . ."

Nevaeh followed her older brother and sister into the dark house, and then it was just Mom and Colin in the car. Normally, Colin would have climbed out and joined Mom in the front. But he felt too groggy for that. Too weary. He closed his eyes again as Mom steered the car back up the Greeveys' long gravel driveway and out onto the road. He leaned his head against the car window, but the constant jostling and turning kept him from falling back asleep. Finally Mom stopped and turned off the engine. Colin opened his eyes—but they weren't home yet. Instead, Mom had

parked under a sign that said Pinewood Motel. A run-down, low-slung brick building with a dozen doors lay beyond the sign, alongside a gravel parking lot with weeds growing at its edge.

“Where are we?” Colin asked. “Why are we here?”

Mom turned around in her seat. She rubbed her forehead.

“Colin, I’m not thinking straight,” she said. “This is too important—I can’t make mistakes. We’ll just stay here tonight, and I’ll decide what to do in the morning.”

“We’re, like, still in Groveview!” Colin protested. He had a vague memory of driving past this motel before. He could see the glow of the brighter, better-lit Walmart parking lot just up the road. So they were only a little past the outskirts of town. “We can’t be more than five or ten minutes away from home. Why can’t we just go there?”

“Because I don’t know if it’s safe,” Mom said. “And if it isn’t safe . . . is it still our home?”

“How can you say that?” Colin demanded. “We’ve lived in that house as long as I can remember! Of course it’s home!”

He thought of Mom tucking him in at night. He thought of them fixing meals together in the small kitchen. He thought of Mom showing him how to mow the yard, and how proud he’d felt the first time he’d done it (before he’d quite realized it was now his job for life). He thought of Mom laughingly agreeing to hang up a photo Colin had taken, showing Mom holding her business card in their neat and tidy (and completely uncluttered) living room.

But maybe those moments hadn’t felt all cozy and homey to Mom. Maybe she’d always been scared, and just trying to hide her fear from Colin.

“Mom, why did you need to go to Pittsburgh?” Colin asked. “What was the paperwork? What decision were you trying to make . . . before you saw my name on that lock?”

For a moment, he thought she wasn’t going to answer. Her face was still in the shadows. But then she leaned toward Colin and clutched his hand.

“It was about your father’s will . . . he left you something. I needed to prove that you really are his son, if I was going to let you claim the inheritance. I wasn’t sure if it was right to or not—the attorney had to assure me that it wasn’t from anything illegal. Or unethical.”

Was this the opening for Colin to admit he knew what his father had done? He could confess that he'd found out his father's real name. He'd looked him up online.

He'd listened to the podcast about the lives his father had ruined.

Should Colin say, *But what if I don't want an inheritance from such a terrible person?*

Could I be all noble and saintly and say I want all my father's money to go to the victims instead? Or to their families?

How could he turn down any money when he knew Mom's business was struggling?

Before he could figure out what to say, Mom let go of his hand.

"But what if we've just tipped off all the . . . the people who would want to harm us?" she asked bleakly. She gestured toward the scene outside the car: the weedy parking lot, the faded sign, the run-down motel. The place where she was saying they'd have to spend the night. "What if *this* is the inheritance you get instead? Us needing to run away again and again and again?"

What Nevaeh and Her Mom Can't Say

Nevaeh woke up early. She immediately grabbed her phone from the nightstand and texted Colin: **Are you awake yet? What's going on?**

He didn't answer. That really wasn't surprising, since Colin's mom always made him plug in his phone outside his bedroom at night. And he liked to sleep late even on a normal Saturday.

Across the room, Prilla was still sound asleep, sprawled on her own bed with her elbows and knees hanging over the edge. Nevaeh could turn her head and see out into the hallway. Roddy's bedroom door was closed. The house was strangely quiet—and the Greevey house was almost never quiet.

So: Nevaeh had nobody to talk to and nothing to do until everyone else was awake.

She let out a sigh that was designed to wake Prilla, but only if Prilla was close to waking up, anyway.

Prilla didn't move.

Nevaeh sighed again—quieter this time—and got up to tiptoe down the stairs.

She was halfway across the living room before she noticed that Mom was sitting silently on the couch, a book open on her lap.

"Oh!" Nevaeh exclaimed, and Mom jumped.

Then they both laughed.

"You—you're *never* just sitting around reading a book!" Nevaeh exclaimed.

"I know—I should break my wrist and ankle more often," Mom joked. "This is the first peace and quiet I've had in twenty-five years."

“Since Axel was born?” Nevaeh asked. But her oldest brother was only twenty-three. “Oh—you mean since you and Dad met.”

“Pretty much,” Mom said. She yawned. “Peace and quiet can get boring, though, so go find yourself some breakfast and then come sit with me and tell me all about Pittsburgh.”

Nevaeh skipped the getting breakfast part and sat down right away. Mom turned to put her book on the coffee table, out of the way. Or at least, out of Nevaeh’s way; Mom had to shove aside a Kleenex box and a coffee mug and a heating pad and two of the rubber balls she’d started using for physical therapy with her broken wrist. But Nevaeh saw how Mom winced, just at that small movement.

You have Mom alone, Nevaeh told herself. Now you can apologize for causing the accident.

But she couldn’t do it if some other family member was about to burst into the room.

“Where are Dad and Axel and Dalton?” she asked.

“They went to do a junk pickup over toward Circleville,” Mom said. “Sounds like there’s a lot to sort through, so they might not be back until dinnertime.”

“Is it a good junk run?” Nevaeh asked.

“You know your father thinks every junk run is a good one,” Mom said wryly.

“No, I mean—will he make a lot of money from it?” Nevaeh asked. “Enough to buy you a new car?”

Mom raised a sandy-brown eyebrow.

“Nevaeh, we have insurance. We’ll be fine,” Mom said. “It’s just going to take time to find a used car that’s as artfully dented as my old one. Don’t worry—I’m sure we’ll have it before you’re ready to get your license and we have a *seventh* driver in the house.”

For some reason, it annoyed Nevaeh that Mom was talking about Nevaeh learning to drive, which was still four years ahead. Nevaeh didn’t want to think that far into the future.

And Nevaeh didn’t want Mom thinking Nevaeh was only worried about herself.

“Stop making jokes about everything!” she practically snarled. “Don’t *do* that. Tell me what you really think. Don’t you ever wish you could just walk into some car dealership and buy a new car? The exact color that you

want and the exact design that you want, and . . . and one that nobody else has owned before you, and that none of your kids are going to borrow and put more dents into? Don't you ever get sick of junk?"

Mom blinked.

"Of course I wish I could buy a new car," she said quietly. "I wish I could buy a new one and pay *cash*. Since we're talking fantasies here, I also wish I could afford to re-decorate the whole house and get your father to clean out all the piles of oddities he leaves lying around. And, I don't know, I wouldn't mind jetting off to Paris or Rome the next time I want a break. Or just having a nice restaurant meal in Columbus or Cincinnati. That would be luxury enough. But, Nevaeh, I knew from the start that your dad and the whole Junk King thing were a package deal, and I love him—and all you kids—a whole lot more than I would love having a new car. Or anything else that has to do with money." She raised the sling around her injured arm ever so slightly. "If we're talking wishes, I'd just go with wishing that my bones would heal faster. Or that I'd never had the wreck at all."

"But you did," Nevaeh moaned. "And it's all my fault. I'm the reason you got hurt. I'm so sorry."

She hadn't meant to say that. Not now. She'd thought she'd need to plan how to confess. Ideally, she maybe would have even prayed beforehand.

But maybe she had been praying and planning ever since the accident. Maybe every time she'd almost told Mom, it had been like a prayer.

Nevaeh wasn't sure if she expected Mom to shove her away in disgust or hug her close in forgiveness. But Mom did neither of those things.

She just looked confused.

"Your fault?" Mom asked. "What are you talking about? You weren't even in the car when it happened!"

"It was my fault you didn't go straight home from work," Nevaeh said. "I made everything take so much longer—I had you pick up Colin and me and drive us out to Steve's Self-Storage. And I *knew* you'd had to work three night shifts in a row. I knew you were too sleepy to do anything but drive straight home. And . . . it was a lie about us wanting to go there because of some job for Dad or Colin's mom. We wanted to go out to Steve's because of . . ." At the last minute, she stopped herself from saying

everything. It wasn't her place to reveal Colin's secrets. "Because of our own mystery-solving business."

Mom put her good hand on Nevaeh's shoulder.

"Is this something you've been feeling guilty about?" Mom asked. "Ever since the accident?"

With tears in her eyes, Nevaeh nodded. Yes. She had.

Mom shook her head.

"I'm not happy about you lying to me—though, really, wasn't it more that you *didn't* correct my assumption that you were there for Dad or Felicia? I don't remember you actually saying that you wanted to go there for junk removal," Mom said. "I kind of suspected you were up to something, and it was just easier not to ask. I trusted you."

The word "trust" felt like a knife thrust. And more guilt.

"See, Mom, you shouldn't have—"

Mom held up her good hand in a "let me finish" kind of way.

"But, Nevaeh, I'm the adult. I'm the one who *chose* to drive when I knew I was too tired to stay awake. I knew I was out-of-my-mind exhausted that morning, and I wasn't safe to drive. That's on me, not you. And I feel guilty enough for both of us. What if I'd hit somebody else, instead of just a tree? What if I'd hurt or even killed another person?"

"*You* feel guilty?" Nevaeh whimpered. "You can't just . . . forgive yourself, like they talk about in church?"

Mom's expression was completely serious now.

"Well, first of all, what they talk about in church always starts with *God* forgiving us, and I do believe that has happened already," she said. "But sometimes it takes a while for me to forgive my own mistakes. And, I mean, maybe it should. That's how we learn. That's how we remember not to make the same mistake again." A ghost of a smile played on her lips. "The next time I'm that tired, I won't be getting behind the wheel of a car. And the next time you're tempted to stretch the truth a little . . . you won't, right?"

Nevaeh let Mom draw her into a half hug. That was all Mom could manage with her injuries. But for a moment, Nevaeh felt like she had when she was a little kid and Mom hugged her. Nevaeh could remember thinking as a five-year-old that Mom's hugs were magic. What else could they be, to make the pain of a skinned knee or a banged-up elbow go away so completely?

Now Nevaeh knew that the hugs had only made her forget about the pain, not eliminated it. Sometimes a hug was only a distraction.

And Nevaeh wasn't so easily distracted now.

She pushed herself back, so she could face Mom directly again.

"But what if it was a good thing—or at least a necessary thing—for me to keep secrets and stretch the truth?" she asked. "What if I was doing it to help someone else?"

"You mean, Colin?" Mom asked.

Nevaeh didn't let herself nod yes or shake her head no.

"What do you know about Colin's dad?" she asked. "What did Colin's mom tell you?"

"That he did something bad, and Felicia believed it was better for Colin to grow up without him," Mom said.

That didn't help at all.

"You're her friend!" Nevaeh protested. "Didn't she tell you anything else?"

"Not until very, very recently," Mom said. "And . . . not anything that I can tell you and still be a good friend."

Was it possible Nevaeh and Mom were both in the same boat? Each of them feeling that they couldn't tell everything, and still be a loyal friend?

Did adults have that problem sometimes, too?

Nevaeh squinted at her mother, and Mom just kept steadily peering back. Nevaeh broke the gaze. She pounded on the couch cushion in frustration.

"Next you're going to tell me, 'You're just a kid, and this is adult stuff, and don't worry—the adults have everything under control,'" she moaned.

Mom reached out and put her hand against Nevaeh's chin, raising it so their gaze was even again.

"No, I'm not going to tell you that," Mom said slowly. "You and Roddy and Prilla came home two days earlier than I expected. Felicia isn't answering my texts, and maybe that just means she's sleeping, which would make sense, but . . . it doesn't feel like the adults have everything under control. I'm afraid that it could end up hurting Colin and Felicia, to have both you and me keeping our friends' secrets."

But Mom didn't say, *I'm the adult and you're the kid, so you have to tell your secrets first*. Mom just sat there waiting.

Nevaeh stood up and began to pace back and forth across the living room. She thought about all the furniture and the pictures she and Colin had found in the storage unit. She thought about the two heart locks on the bridge—the one they’d seen the inside of, and the one Colin had carried away, still locked.

And then she thought about the awful things she’d read about Dr. Creekman’s crimes.

Something didn’t fit.

“Do you know anyone besides Felicia—and, well, Colin as a baby—who ever met Colin’s dad?” Nevaeh asked.

“Yeah—your father did,” Mom said.

“What?” Nevaeh exclaimed, so startled she tripped and almost fell. She was at the far end of the living room, and she threw her arms out to grab on to the nearest object. Her fingers brushed something warm—skin.

And then someone was reaching out to steady her.

It was Roddy. He’d awakened and come downstairs at the exact right time.

“My knight in shining armor!” Nevaeh cried, really hamming it up. “You saved me!” She put the back of her hand against her forehead, as if she were about to swoon in awe.

“Just call me Klutzman,” Roddy deadpanned. “My superpower is that I show up to save other people who are just as klutzy as me.” He rubbed sleep from his eyes. “Did I hear you talking about the time Dad met Colin’s father?”

“We were,” Nevaeh said. “Why?”

Roddy glanced back over his shoulder, as if he was checking to see if Prilla had awakened, too, and was anywhere nearby. Then he winced and faced Nevaeh and Mom squarely again.

“The day Dad met Colin’s father . . . ,” he began. “Did you know I was there, too?”

29

Colin, Awake

Colin woke to bright sunshine streaming in through cracked blinds.

I thought we were getting up early to sightsee in Pittsburgh with Mom . . . oh, wait.

Everything came back to him in a rush: The frantic drive away from Pittsburgh in the middle of the night. The fact that he and Mom had checked in to a run-down, nasty motel because Mom was scared to go home.

The fact that Colin knew about his father's horrible crimes now.

And he was so ashamed, he hadn't been able to talk to Mom about it. Or Nevaeh.

Automatically, he reached toward the nightstand between his bed and Mom's where he'd put his phone the night before. He couldn't have said if he planned to text Nevaeh or find more awful information about his dad.

But the phone wasn't there.

He bolted upright. Across the room, the cracked, sagging blinds swayed over a dirty window. The gray—or maybe just dirty—walls were blank down to a shaggy brown carpet that could have been there since the 1970s. The bed beside his, where Mom had slept, was empty except for tangled sheets and blankets.

And . . . a note on the pillow.

Colin slid out of bed and grabbed the note. He had to blink the sleep out of his eyes to get them to focus. Or maybe just to get himself to believe what he was reading:

Dear Colin,

I should be back before you see this. But just in case . . . I'm getting rid of the phones and everything else I thought could be

used to track us. I think we need to lie low for a while. So don't tell anybody where you are or who you are. I'll be back with breakfast, but if you're really starving, there's a vending machine out by the motel office. I left some change in the nightstand drawer.

I'm really sorry about all of this. I love you so much—I never wanted this to happen again.

*Love,
Mom*

Again, Colin thought.

This was what Mom's life had been like when she'd left his father, when Colin was a baby. She'd said so last night. Colin could fill in the gaps of what she hadn't said: *When Franklin Creekman's crimes were exposed. When he was arrested. When his victims and their families were so angry.*

Colin read the note a second time, getting stuck on the line, "I'm getting rid of the phones and everything else I thought could be used to track us. . . ."

He couldn't call Nevaeh and ask her for help. He couldn't listen to any more of the podcast about his dad's crimes.

How could anyone survive without a phone?

And . . . what else had Mom taken away?

His duffel bag still lay open on top of the dresser. He went over and yanked out the shorts and shirt he'd changed out of last night. He'd had the broken heart lock from the Pittsburgh bridge right below that—the lock Mom had cut off the bridge.

Except, that lock was missing now. The only sign that it had ever been in his duffel bag was a slight smear of rust on his inside-out shirt.

Why in the world would Mom think anybody could use that heart lock to track us?

He remembered a kid in his class at school who kept losing his house keys. Then the kid's parents had bought AirTags to stick on the keys. The kid still kept losing the keys, but now he was always able to find them, too.

Did Mom actually think someone might have put an AirTag on that rusty lock? Didn't she think one of us would have noticed?

But maybe they wouldn't have noticed. For all he knew, maybe the AirTag could be embedded in the metal of the lock itself.

And he didn't have his phone to look that up.

Then he remembered the other heart lock buried deeper in his duffel bag—the one he hadn't told his mother about. The newer one engraved “For my beloved son, Colin.”

The one he hadn't opened yet.

Colin pawed through the rest of his clothes, unearthing the pants and shorts near the bottom that had been neatly folded. He came to a pair of black running shorts that had a zip-up pocket on the side. He'd rolled the shorts inside a pair of jeans, to hide the fact that the shorts were much heavier than anything made of flimsy nylon should be.

Colin shook the shorts free from the jeans, and . . . yes! The shorts were still heavy. With trembling hands, he unzipped the pocket.

The engraved heart lock was still there.

Mom didn't find it, Colin thought. Mom didn't even know to look for it.

He'd dropped her note on the scarred surface of the dresser top when he started pulling clothes from the duffel bag. But now he looked back at her words: “. . . don't tell anybody where you are . . .”

He didn't know what this second heart lock held inside its hollow interior. But it looked big enough to contain the AirTag he'd seen on his classmate's keys.

And I was pretty much set up to find this lock, because of the box left on my porch, Colin thought. Which I must have gotten about the same time Mom was told to go to Pittsburgh to meet with an attorney about some “inheritance.” It has to all be connected. . . .

Everything about this seemed crazy. Paranoid. But if this heart lock contained an AirTag—or any other kind of tracking device—it could be telling someone right this minute exactly where he was. It could track him anywhere he went.

Mom would probably say that Colin should run out into the cornfield behind this motel and throw the lock as far away as he could. Or—better yet—maybe he should rush over to the Walmart parking lot and drop the lock into the bed of some pickup truck or inside some car's half-open

window, and hope that truck or car was headed somewhere far away from Groveview.

I'll just call Mom and ask—

He couldn't call Mom. He didn't have a phone. And if she'd already gotten rid of everything, neither did she.

For a moment, Colin did nothing but trace the engraving on the lock with his fingertips: *For my beloved son, Colin . . .*

Those words still had power over him. Even if his dad was a terrible person. Even if Colin now knew exactly what his dad had done.

Colin couldn't throw away this lock without seeing what was inside.

Before, he'd been determined to find a key, because he didn't want to damage the lock. But now, he just wanted it open.

If Mom cut the other lock off the bridge, maybe she has some sort of metal-cutter in her suitcase, he thought.

He went over to the folding luggage holder Mom had set up beside her bed the night before. But Mom's suitcase was gone now.

Her suitcase wasn't in the closet or the bathroom, either. He looked under both beds—a huge mistake, since some of the globs of dust and hair hiding there looked big enough to possibly be mice or rats instead. At least they didn't move—he didn't think.

He dropped the side of the bedspread and had to face reality: Mom had taken her suitcase with her.

His heart raced.

If I was really going to be paranoid, maybe I'd think that Mom had left me behind for good. That she's never coming back. That . . .

But, no. Colin didn't know enough about his dad, and he wasn't sure what secrets Mom was still keeping from him. But he *knew* that Mom wouldn't abandon him. She wouldn't leave him in danger and escape to safety all by herself.

It was funny how much better that made him feel, that there was *something* he could count on.

Colin stood up. Through the broken blinds, he could see the Walmart sign off in the distance. He made a decision. He picked up a pen from the nightstand, and added a reply to Mom's note:

I woke up and was so hungry I couldn't wait for breakfast or just eat vending-machine food. So I'm walking over to Walmart.

But I promise, I'll hide if I see anybody I know. And I'll be right back.

Mom wouldn't like that note. It would make her worry.

And it was a lie, anyway.

Colin wasn't leaving the motel to buy food.

He was going out for bolt cutters.

Roddy Talks

“*When* did you and Dad meet Colin’s dad?” Nevaeh demanded, poking a finger against Roddy’s chest. “And why didn’t you tell us that a long time ago? Why didn’t you tell Colin? You saw how upset he was about his dad dying!”

Roddy took a step back. Maybe Nevaeh was coming on a bit strong.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” he said, holding up his hands in protest. “I only met the man once. When I was seven or eight, maybe? Back then, I didn’t even know Colin.”

“But you do *now*,” Nevaeh said. “Didn’t you think even once, ‘Oh, maybe it will help him if I share my memories’?” A new idea hit her. A sad one. “Or were you protecting Colin by not telling him? Did it seem like Colin’s dad was such a horrible person that you couldn’t find anything nice to say about him? How did you and Dad meet him, anyway?”

“Nevaeh,” Mom interrupted gently. “You need to give Roddy a chance to answer one question before you ask the next. Roddy, do you want to have a seat?”

Roddy shrugged and sat down in the ancient recliner that had stood beside the couch as long as Nevaeh could remember. He leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling, his usual “I’m trying to remember everything” pose.

“All the way home from Pittsburgh, I was texting back and forth with Prilla about whether I should tell Mrs. Creedmont this story,” he admitted. “Prilla said I’d already made a mess of things, and I should wait until we talked with you and Dad, Mom.”

“Was *that* why you wouldn’t let me see your phone screen last night?” Nevaeh asked. “And how did you make a mess of things? What did you

do?”

“Nevaeh!” Roddy and Mom exclaimed together.

Mom also fixed her with a stern look before adding, “Roddy, should I preview this story before you tell Nevaeh?”

Nevaeh was all ready to protest, *Colin’s my best friend! This affects him, so I have to know what happened! and I’m old enough to hear anything Roddy might say!*

But Roddy quickly promised, “It’s fine for Nevaeh to hear this.” He cleared his throat. “Nevaeh, I didn’t think Colin’s dad was a terrible person. I liked him. He gave me candy.”

Nevaeh so wanted to say, *Roddy! You’re not supposed to take candy from strangers!* But Roddy was launching into his story now.

“I was in second or third grade—when I already knew about Einstein, but hadn’t learned anything about Max Planck yet—and remember that time everybody in my class got pink eye?” Roddy asked.

Nevaeh didn’t remember. If Roddy had been seven or eight, she would have been only two or three. Too young to know or care about pink eye.

“Anyhow, I woke up one morning and my eyes were kind of red, and I didn’t tell Mom and Dad it was because I’d stayed up too late reading, not because I was actually sick,” Roddy said. “So you kept me home from school, Mom, and Dad was supposed to watch me because you had to sleep to get ready for work that night.”

“Ah, yes, the juggling childcare years,” Mom said wryly.

“That was also when Dad didn’t think he could make quite enough money just being the Junk King, so he was also the Moving Truck King on the side,” Roddy said.

Nevaeh didn’t remember that, either, but she kept her mouth shut.

“So Dad told me that, since I wasn’t actually feverish or anything, I could help him with his work that day, even though I wasn’t really old enough yet,” Roddy said. “He did a total Tom-Sawyer-painting-the-fence number on me—I wanted to help so bad!”

“Yeah, Dad’s good at that,” Nevaeh muttered.

“Meanwhile, if you really had had pink eye, you would have been spreading it everywhere,” Mom said, rolling her eyes. “No wonder your dad never told me the whole story—I thought you were just waiting in the cab of the truck. Apparently I should have reminded him about the whole concept of germs!”

“I guess Dad figured that since we were moving stuff into a storage unit, it’d be a while before anyone touched any of it again, anyhow,” Roddy said with another shrug.

Storage unit, Nevaeh thought. She snapped her fingers and forgot she was supposed to be quiet.

“So you were there when Colin’s dad put all his baby furniture into Steve’s Self-Storage?” she gasped. “And you *helped*? So you have all the answers! Did he say—” She wanted to ask about why Colin’s dad had arranged the furniture like an actual bedroom. But maybe she shouldn’t reveal that she’d seen it. “Did Colin’s dad explain what he was doing?”

“I remember him saying that his wife had taken his little boy away, and he wanted the boy to have all his stuff, but the wife was mad at him, so he couldn’t just *give* it to her,” Roddy said. “And I remember him saying he was going away on a long trip, and he couldn’t take much with him. So he’d just leave the key to the storage unit with Dad, and he’d let Dad know when it was time to hand the key over to Felicia.”

“Long trip?” Nevaeh burst out. “You mean, he was going to prison!”

“Nevaeh . . . ,” Mom murmured, her eyes sad.

So she knew, Nevaeh thought. Mom had probably known that part of it all along.

But Roddy’s reaction was almost comical. He jerked back the same way he’d done when he was going through a phase of thinking he should become an inventor, and all his electrical experiments gave him shocks.

“What?” Roddy asked. “So . . . are you saying what we put in that storage unit might have been stolen property?”

The silver cup, Nevaeh thought. *The high-end furniture*. *The . . .*

She hadn’t exactly cataloged everything. She and Colin had been too busy looking at pictures.

And then she’d gotten the call about Mom’s accident, and Nevaeh had stopped caring about anything else.

But was Colin’s dad trying to pass on his illegal drug profits to Colin and Mrs. Creedmont? Or just hide them for himself until he got out of prison? Nevaeh wondered.

Neither choice made sense. Colin’s dad had been in prison for five years. If Roddy was seven or eight when he met Colin’s dad, that would have been about ten years ago.

So Colin's dad would have had five years after he got out of prison to come back and claim all the stuff in the storage unit—either for himself or to give to Colin. And he hadn't done that.

Unless he was just using Colin's baby things as a cover story, and he did take other valuables out when he got out of prison, Nevaeh thought.

But why would he have kept paying for the storage unit?

And, anyhow, going back to the very beginning, after the police arrested Colin's dad, why would they let him go to another state to hide a bunch of stuff before sending him to prison?

Roddy was still shaking his head in astonishment. Or maybe . . . shame.

"Well, this is awkward," he said. "I'm going to have to tell Prilla she was right, and I did mess up."

"Why do you say that?" Mom asked. "Roddy, you were just a little kid the last time you were in that storage unit."

"No, that's not true," Roddy said. "I went back again last week. Just to see it. And to make sure everything looked as nice as I remembered."

"Why?" Nevaeh demanded. She was getting chills. It was like Roddy just kept giving her more puzzle pieces that didn't fit. Or maybe they almost fit, but she still didn't know enough.

"Because I felt so bad for Colin," Roddy said. "I wanted to help, but . . . you know. People come to me about math homework, not for emotional support. So I did the one thing I could think of . . ."

Nevaeh figured it out.

"It was you!" she burst out. "You're the one who gave Colin the key!"

The Heart Lock

Just act normal, Colin told himself, darting through the aisles of the Groveview Walmart. *Nobody's watching. Don't give anyone any reason to notice you.*

It was a little strange for a twelve-year-old to be wandering around Walmart alone, but Colin tried to walk confidently. If anybody asked, he could say Mom was just over in the grocery section. He could say she'd sent him to hardware to grab some item from her shopping list. Maybe he could make up something about a cartload of younger brothers and sisters, as a reason she hadn't wanted to walk this far.

Or, since I'm pretending anyway, I could say my dad sent me. . . .

His father kind of *had* sent him. Because Colin was there to get bolt cutters for the heart lock his father left for him.

Because, even though Dad was a criminal, maybe he had loved Colin, after all.

That thought almost made Colin double over, right in the paint aisle.

Stop thinking so much, he told himself. *Stop thinking about any family member, real or imaginary. You can't act normal when you're thinking like that.*

He took a deep breath and stepped into the next aisle. And . . . success. There were the bolt cutters, all in a row.

Between the vending-machine coins Mom had left him and the small amount of money Colin had already had with him—money he thought he'd be using for Pittsburgh souvenirs—he barely had enough for the cheapest pair of bolt cutters. They looked flimsy and easily broken, but he grabbed them anyhow. Keeping his head down, he went out through the self-checkout lanes.

“Colin! Hey, Colin!”

Colin turned around to see Mr. Torres, the father of the infant twins he and Nevaeh sometimes babysat, waving and calling to him from the back of the self-checkout line. Mr. Torres pointed to the babies strapped into the car seats in his shopping cart and hollered, “Come see how much they’ve grown!”

Colin made an apologetic face and gestured toward the receipt and bolt cutters in his hand. Then he pointed out toward the parking lot and shrugged. He called back, “Sorry, can’t! Mom’s waiting in the car. Next time!”

He stepped out the Walmart doors and collapsed against the wall.

So much for not letting anyone see him.

So much for acting normal.

And why did I have to point at the bolt cutters? Just so everyone would see what I bought?

Now it would look even stranger if Mr. Torres came out and saw Colin walking along the road toward the Pinewood Motel.

Colin raced around the side of the building so he could hide until Mr. Torres was gone. Crouching down behind a bush, he struggled to pull the bolt cutters from the thick plastic ties holding them in place.

Sheesh, you practically need bolt cutters just to open the packaging, he thought.

But finally he had them out. He pulled the “For my beloved son” heart lock out of his shorts pocket.

No matter how he squeezed, the bolt cutters wouldn’t cut the thick bar that kept the heart locked tightly shut. Colin was ready to give up in frustration until it occurred to him: The metal of the heart itself was much thinner, and probably easier to cut.

But I don’t want to destroy it! And what if someday I do find a key?

Someday wasn’t good enough. He wanted to see inside the heart *now*.

For all I know, it’s empty, anyway, he told himself. *And my father’s a criminal, so why do I care?*

Colin positioned the bolt cutters to cut off the bottom of the heart. He squeezed and twisted . . . and when he drew the bolt cutters back, there was a hole in the metal.

He picked up a twig from the ground to stick it into the heart. The twig caught on something thick, stuffed into the middle of the heart.

He had to maneuver the twig back and forth—and then get a second twig, when the first one broke—but eventually he saw an edge of thin, yellowing paper inside the heart. Holding his breath, he inched the paper out and unfolded it.

Dear Colin, it began.

The entire rest of the paper was filled with the same slanting writing. Colin glanced quickly to the bottom of the letter, where he saw three words: *Love, Your Father*

This was exactly what he'd been hoping for.

He crouched lower, hiding more completely behind the bushes.

And he began to read.

What Roddy Revealed

“You gave Colin that key without even talking to your dad?” Mom asked Roddy. “Wait a minute—Nevaeh, was *that* the storage unit you and Colin went to? The morning of my accident?”

Mom still had a splint on her arm and a thick wrapping of bandages on her leg and ankle and foot. The bruises on her face had barely faded from purple to an even more pathetic-looking yellow. But it was easy to forget that, because she looked so fierce all of a sudden.

Nevaeh kind of thought that if Mom hadn’t been injured, she would have jumped up from the couch and poked her finger against Roddy’s chest just as dramatically as Nevaeh had done only moments earlier.

Nevaeh let Roddy defend himself first.

“Dad wasn’t doing anything with that key!” Roddy protested. “He was just letting it sit there on his office shelf. And Colin’s dad was already dead! I figured it wouldn’t hurt anything if I let Colin see that . . . well, you know. See that his father had loved him. Or, at least loved him enough to give him a bunch of stuff when he was a baby.”

Nevaeh saw Mom clench her jaw and take a deep breath. Then she let it out slowly.

“I guess I can’t blame you for not understanding everything when you were seven or eight,” Mom told Roddy. “But now . . .”

“What was so wrong about Roddy giving Colin the key?” Nevaeh asked. “He was trying to help! Why didn’t *Dad* give Colin that key? Or why didn’t he at least tell Mrs. Creedmont about it years and years ago? Or . . . did he do that, and Mrs. Creedmont was the one who wouldn’t let Colin have all his old stuff?”

It was getting harder and harder to know who to be mad at.

Mom held up her hand to fend off more questions.

“You know how your dad’s always so sure of himself?” she asked. That was an understatement. “He wasn’t sure at all about *this*. Neither of us knew the whole story from Felicia back then. So your father spent a whole day helping Colin’s dad move stuff into that storage unit. And he was talking with the guy the whole time. And he said the guy was charming. But . . . he told me afterward that he honestly couldn’t tell if the guy was just some sad-sack lovelorn ex-husband trying to get his wife and kid back, or if it was something scarier. Like . . . he might have been a stalker. Someone . . . abusive.”

Stalker, Nevaeh thought. Maybe it fit. There was evidence: The way everything in the storage unit had been set up like a baby’s room. The way it had seemed more creepy than loving.

And the way Mrs. Creedmont was so freaked out last night . . . she was acting like someone terrified of a stalker.

“But Colin’s dad is dead now!” Nevaeh protested. “Even if he was a stalker, the danger’s past!”

“The pain of that kind of emotional manipulation can last a long time,” Mom said, shaking her head sadly. “Bringing those memories back for Felicia—when she was already dealing with hearing about her husband’s death—it wasn’t fair.”

Nevaeh expected Roddy to mumble, *I’m sorry*. And maybe ask how he could make it up to Colin and Mrs. Creedmont.

But Roddy set his jaw just as stubbornly as Mom had.

“If Dad even *suspected* Colin’s dad might be a stalker, why didn’t he warn Mrs. Creedmont?” Roddy asked.

“He did,” Mom said. “And Felicia assured him she wasn’t scared of her ex-husband, so Dad just dropped it.”

“But he kept the key on his office shelf for ten years, in a box labeled with Colin’s name,” Roddy mumbled.

“You know your father has never been good about letting go of things,” Mom said.

“Didn’t he realize I’d look at that again and again, and feel bad for some other little boy I didn’t even know until this summer?” Roddy asked forlornly.

Nevaeh did a double take. Because Roddy was so much older than her, her memories of him as a seven- or eight-year-old were almost entirely

from pictures. And those photos mostly showed him putting wires together using his first electricity kit, or dressing up like a mad scientist for Halloween, or reading thick books about Einstein while their older brothers Axel and Dalton were playing baseball. Things like that. But Nevaeh knew—maybe better than anyone else—that Roddy wasn't *just* a nerd. He'd always been a sentimental mushball, too.

"Roddy, you didn't have to make it such a mysterious thing, leaving that box on Colin's porch," she said. "You could have just handed it to him straight out and explained."

Roddy hung his head.

"I guess I knew I should have asked Dad first," he said. "I guess I didn't want to be held responsible."

Nevaeh and Roddy both looked toward Mom. Nevaeh waited for her scolding.

But Mom was staring out the window, a faraway look in her eye.

"Maybe *I* should have asked more questions, too," she mumbled. "You know how your dad and Felicia never were any good at communicating with one another. . . ." She scooped up her phone from the coffee table, raced her fingers over the screen, and put it to her ear.

Nevaeh was standing close enough that she could hear her father's voice rumble out from the phone: "Yeah? You doing okay, or do you need us to come home?"

"No, no, I'm fine—just doing an ancient-history fact-check," Mom said. "Remember all those years ago when you met Felicia's ex-husband, and he set up that storage unit, and you thought there was something a little off about the whole thing . . . Did you actually tell Felicia about the storage unit? Or did you just say, 'Hey, your ex-husband was in town, and I thought you should know?'"

"You expect me to remember the exact wording of a conversation from ten years ago?" Dad asked.

Nevaeh knew this was kind of a joke between Mom and Dad. Dad acted like he could remember every junk pickup he'd ever made. But he'd been known to forget his own birth date.

"Just the broad outlines," Mom said.

Nevaeh could hear Dad's heavy sigh as though he were right there, not miles away on a junk run.

“I’m pretty sure Felicia shut down the whole conversation as soon as I said the words, ‘ex-husband,’” Dad said. “I might have said something like, ‘Uh, it’s not a problem if he knows where you are, is it?’ and she told me not to worry about it and to leave her alone. This isn’t about that key in my office, is it? I’ve been trying to decide about just giving that to her for the past ten years. I even started to inch toward asking her about it when we were working together at the Zucchini Festival earlier this summer, and she bit my head off. And then that news came about her ex-husband dying, and . . . I didn’t want to stir things up.”

“Your son took matters into his own hands,” Mom said. “Roddy gave Colin the key.”

“Oh,” Dad said, in a way that made Nevaeh picture the exact way he was probably wincing. “That’s bad.”

“What is it with adults always thinking kids shouldn’t know anything?” Nevaeh demanded. “Colin *deserved* to know—”

She broke off, because she could hear Mom asking Dad, “Got any advice about who I should call first? Felicia—or the cops?”

“The cops!” Roddy echoed. “Why would you call the cops?”

Mom lowered the phone and peered sadly over at both Roddy and Nevaeh.

“This isn’t just about Colin anymore,” she said.

Colin and His Father

Dear Colin,

I don't know if you will ever read these words. This is a coward's way of reaching out, and maybe I am writing this as much or more for myself than for you. If you find this and get this far into this letter—and maybe I should also say, if you have your mother's permission—please just call me instead, (606) 555-8088. Call anytime, day or night. It would be easier to talk. I am very blue tonight, and maybe I will not tell everything right. But here goes.

First of all, I should tell you not to blame your mother for anything. I was guilty of everything I was charged with. I didn't see that when I was first arrested, or when she left me. I was still blaming everyone else: the drug reps, my friend Otis, the patients themselves. Your mother. Know that in the beginning, I didn't understand how addictive those pills could be—in the beginning, I was only prescribing them to help my distressed patients, to give them a reprieve from pain. Other doctors made the same mistakes.

But when the facts came out—when there was plenty of evidence that those painkillers could make people's lives worse, not better—other doctors became more cautious with their prescriptions. And I didn't. Your mom probably told you I did it for the money—that's what the prosecutors said, too. And that WAS part of it. Your mother and I both grew up poor, and I wanted to give you everything we hadn't had. But it was the power, too. I loved the way the patients looked at me, the way

they were always so grateful. I loved that adulation as much as the money. I wanted you to grow up and see me that way, too.

Instead, I condemned way too many people to addiction and death. I heard the stories at the trial. I know I'm to blame. Not completely, but enough to make me guilty, guilty, guilty. I know I deserved every minute I served in prison. I ruined lives, and I deserved to have mine ruined, too.

But by then, I had already driven your mother away by not accepting the blame. She was right to divorce me when I wasn't repentant. She was right to say I wasn't a fit father. And underneath it all, I was so ashamed. So I signed the paperwork saying I would let you go. I came to believe, just like she did, that you were better off without me.

But I'm different now. The chaplain in prison told me when I was leaving that I could start over fresh. He said I can't change the past no matter how I regret it, but God's forgiveness and my own sincerity means I can live the rest of my life in a new way. But I could do that more easily if I didn't feel as though I am still failing you. You are eight years old as I write this, and I don't even know where you are. I don't know what name you are using now, even though I myself told your mother she should change both your names, for your own protection. She had the records sealed, which was wise, given how many dangerous enemies I'd made. But now I can't find you, either.

Colin blinked back tears. His father must have written this letter before he'd found out that Colin and his mom were in Groveview, before he'd gone there and put all Colin's baby possessions in that storage unit. Colin had just discovered his father's clues in reverse order—finding the storage unit first, then the heart lock and this letter.

But he loved me! That word on the outside of the heart lock, "beloved"—it was always true!

Colin squinted off into the distance, trying to put the timeline together. Once Dad knew where Colin and Mom were . . . had Dad told Mom about the storage unit? Had he asked to see Colin then?

But, no—that would mean Mom lied. She'd told him Dad knew all along where Colin was. She'd told him Dad had made no effort to get

custody, or even to visit.

Or had she just said he hadn't asked for the *right* to visit?

Was there a difference?

The more Colin found out, the more he realized he didn't know.

What if Mom didn't know everything, either?

She doesn't know about this letter. She only knew about one of the heart locks. . . .

Colin had been staring unseeingly toward the Walmart parking lot and the road beyond. But suddenly the view registered: that was a blue SUV driving past on the road.

A blue SUV that looked exactly like his mom's.

Colin scrambled up and stepped out past the bush to see better. While he watched, the blue SUV turned into the driveway for the motel next door.

It was Mom.

She's going to find the note I left her, he thought. And then, and then . . .

Would she come to Walmart to look for him?

Colin dropped the bolt cutters into the bush. Let somebody else find them. He stuffed the twisted heart lock and his father's letter back into his shorts pocket. He took off racing back toward the motel.

He darted around a shopping cart but cut things too close—and immediately slammed into the man pushing the cart.

"Mijo! Are you okay?"

It was Mr. Torres.

And that word he'd used—*mijo*. It was the same word he used with his babies. Colin was pretty sure it meant something like "my son" in Spanish.

Colin started blinking back tears. Mr. Torres was such a good dad. Why hadn't Colin gotten a dad like Mr. Torres?

Colin needed to apologize for running into Mr. Torres. He needed to say something normal so Mr. Torres would think that everything was fine.

But Colin couldn't speak past the lump in his throat. He couldn't even look Mr. Torres in the eye.

"Ah, Colin, did something happen with your mom?"

"She's not here," Colin muttered. At least he could manage that.

He sneaked a glance up at Mr. Torres—Mr. Torres with his Twin Daddy T-shirt, his jumbo cup of Subway coffee in the cart's cupholder. Mr. Torres

had his own kids to worry about.

And yet, Mr. Torres was nodding kindly, as if he thought he understood Colin's problems. As if he *cared*.

"Oh, so she dropped you off and said she was coming back—she probably just got stuck in traffic coming through town," Mr. Torres said. "Did you try calling her?"

"I don't have my phone."

"Now, that's a problem I can help with!" Mr. Torres said merrily. He pulled out his own phone and slipped it into Colin's hand. One of the twins began to whimper in Mr. Torres's cart. The second baby began flailing his arms around—a sign that Colin knew meant he was about to cry. Mr. Torres patted both babies' heads and added, "Look, I'm parked right over there. I'll get the boys back into the car before they erupt, and you can bring me the phone when you're done. Here—I'll unlock it."

He put his hand over Colin's, moving it so the phone screen was directed at Mr. Torres's face. Mr. Torres gave a cheesy smile for the phone's facial recognition, then let go of Colin's hand and began pushing the cart with the twins toward his minivan.

And leaving Colin with the phone.

It had all happened so fast, Colin could almost let himself believe the story Mr. Torres thought he understood—Colin *wished* he could solve all his problems by calling Mom.

I'll have to pretend to, so Mr. Torres doesn't get suspicious, Colin told himself.

But Mom had said she'd gone somewhere to hide her phone, as well as Colin's. For all Colin knew, Mom was coming back to whisk them away to some other place, far from Groveview. Far from anywhere anybody could ever find them again.

The last line he'd read of his father's letter came back to him: *But now I can't find you, either.*

What if all this had been a misunderstanding from the very beginning?

What if Colin's dad wasn't even dead?

I do have his phone number. . . .

Colin checked to make sure that Mr. Torres wasn't watching—he had his back to Colin now, as he headed for his green minivan. Quickly, Colin inched his father's letter out of his pocket, and copied the scrawled phone number into the keypad on Mr. Torres's phone. He hit the Call button.

The phone rang four times, and Colin was about to give up when a woman's voice answered: "Hello?"

"Is Franklin Creekman there?" Colin gulped. "Doctor Franklin Creekman?"

"Oh, no," the woman said, her voice weighed down with sadness. "I'm so sorry. He died. I just . . . haven't gotten around to canceling his phone yet."

Colin's tears threatened again. This was proof, wasn't it? Colin's dad really was dead. Colin should believe everything his mother had ever told him. And he never should have called this number.

"Why were you trying to reach him?" the woman asked.

"I—" Colin's throat felt clogged again. He managed to choke out, "Who are you? Why are you answering his phone?"

"I'm Mrs. Creekman. His wife."

"You mean—" Colin gasped.

Colin almost dropped the phone. Of course it was possible. Colin's parents had gotten divorced more than a decade ago. Colin's dad easily could have remarried since then.

He could have had more kids, too, Colin thought, anger washing over him. *No wonder he forgot me. No wonder he stopped caring.*

"Please don't hang up," the woman said. Which was odd, because who ever wanted to stay on a call with a stranger? "You sound like a kid. . . . Who is this?"

Across the parking lot, Colin saw Mr. Torres stop the shopping cart beside his minivan. Mr. Torres leaned down to kiss each baby's forehead before transferring them to the car. It made Colin's heart pound, just watching.

"Who am I, and why am I calling Franklin Creekman?" Colin repeated to the woman on the phone. "Because I'm his son. Even if he has other kids. Even if he's a criminal. I'm still Dr. Franklin Creekman's so-called beloved son."

And then he hung up.

Nevaeh's Family Investigates

Colin's mom didn't answer her phone. Roddy, Mom, and Nevaeh all piled into a spare Junk King truck and drove straight to the Creedmonts' house. But no one answered the door.

Mrs. Creedmont's SUV wasn't parked on the street out front, either.

"This is worrying me," Mom said. She pulled out her phone again. She seemed to have gotten good at dialing one-handed. But she held the phone to her ear for a long time without saying anything. Even from across the porch, Nevaeh could hear endless ringing.

Nevaeh cupped her hands beside her face to peer through the Creedmonts' front window. She could see the familiar living room on the other side of the glass. But the colorful red blanket that usually draped so perfectly over the back of the couch was trailing onto the floor. The lamp on the coffee table was off-center, as if someone had knocked against the lampshade and not bothered setting it right.

"Have you ever known the Creedmonts' house *not* to look perfect?" Nevaeh asked.

Mom and Roddy joined her at the window.

"It doesn't look like thieves have been here or anything," Roddy said. "What are you going to do—call the police because there's a blanket on the floor? This place still looks a thousand times better than my bedroom ever does."

"You're right—they wouldn't believe us that anything's wrong," Mom said grimly. "They certainly wouldn't think there was any reason to issue a search warrant."

"A search warrant!" Nevaeh exclaimed. "Why would anyone need that?"

“I don’t want to believe any of this is that serious,” Mom said. “But . . .” She used her crutch to nudge aside one of the flowerpots on the porch, then bent down to lift out a small section of the floorboard. A moment later, she stood back up, holding a key. “I think we’re going to have to go into the Creedmonts’ house and find out.”

“Should we worry about leaving fingerprints?” Roddy asked as Mom unlocked the door.

Mom shot him a troubled glance. Then she switched from reaching for the doorknob with her bare hand to holding on to it with the bottom of her shirt.

Inside, the house felt dimmer than usual. Apart from the blanket and the lamp, nothing else seemed amiss in the living room. Nevaeh headed for the kitchen, which was spotless as always—no crumbs on the counter, no dishes in the sink. But the silverware drawer was open just a fraction of an inch. In her own family’s kitchen, Nevaeh wouldn’t have noticed the difference—in the Greevey household, having everything shut tight would have been the unsettling detail. Now, though, Nevaeh stopped in her tracks. She pulled a dish towel from its hook perfectly centered on the wall, and used the towel to tug on the drawer handle.

All the silverware was right where it was supposed to be, neatly stacked. But Nevaeh could only see the bottom halves of the knives, forks, and spoons. Something was jammed in the back of the drawer, keeping Nevaeh from pulling the drawer all the way out.

Still keeping the towel over her hand, Nevaeh reached in and wriggled out the offending object . . . a phone. Mrs. Creedmont’s phone.

Colin’s phone was right beneath it.

Nevaeh pulled them both out.

“Hey, Mom, I know why Mrs. Creedmont wasn’t answering your calls,” she announced, holding up both phones. “And why Colin didn’t answer my texts.”

“Maybe those are just old, spare phones,” Roddy suggested, coming to look over her shoulder.

“Mrs. Creedmont would never keep an old phone,” Nevaeh said. “Haven’t you listened to anything she says about decluttering? Anyway, these are definitely their regular phones. I recognize the cases.” Mrs. Creedmont’s was sleek and black; Colin’s was a subtle, swirling blue.

“Maybe Felicia and Colin just decided to . . . I don’t know. Go for a walk, maybe?” Mom said. “And maybe Felicia insisted they leave their phones here so they could really talk. Without distractions. You know us moms. We make demands like that all the time.”

Nevaeh wanted so badly to agree. But she couldn’t.

“This isn’t where the Creedmonts keep their phones when they’re not using them,” Nevaeh countered. She pointed to the phone docking station attached to the kitchen wall. “That is. And if they’re just taking a walk, why’s the SUV missing? Why would Mrs. Creedmont drive anywhere without her phone?”

She was trying to stay calm—like Mom. But it was getting harder and harder.

She looked down at the phones again. Both screens stayed dark and dead.

“And why would Colin and Mrs. Creedmont have turned their phones off if they were just going for a walk?” she asked.

Mom frowned.

“Nevaeh, do you know where Colin put the key to the storage unit? The one Roddy sent him?”

“Yeah, out in their shed,” Nevaeh said. “Because he didn’t want his mom to see it.”

It didn’t feel like a betrayal of Colin to say this now. It had started feeling like Mom, Roddy, and Nevaeh were a team working together to help Colin and Mrs. Creedmont. And that meant they *had* to share information.

Does Mom think the Creedmonts have been kidnapped? Nevaeh wondered. *Or that whatever danger Mrs. Creedmont was so worried about last night caught up with them?*

Nevaeh didn’t dare say these things out loud.

She led Roddy and Mom to the hook by the back door where the Creedmonts kept the key to their shed.

“It’s a good thing you’ve spent so much time with Colin this summer,” Mom murmured. “Makes me feel less like we’re breaking and entering.”

Out in the shed, Nevaeh knew right where to look for the storage-unit key: in the repair kit under the seat of Colin’s bicycle. Nevaeh saw the orange Steve’s Self-Storage key chain tag as soon as she unzipped the kit.

“So we’ll go and look at the storage unit together?” Roddy asked. “That’s our next step?”

“Yes, but we shouldn’t go there alone,” Mom said grimly. She began dialing her phone again. She put it to her ear and asked, “Sharla, are you on or off duty today?”

Nevaeh recognized the name. Mom’s friend Sharla was a sheriff’s deputy.

Nevaeh stopped feeling so much as though Mom was on their same team.

“Mom, you’re going to make it seem like Colin and his mom are criminals!” she protested as soon as Mom was off the phone. “If you let Sharla see what’s in that storage unit, and you open it with a key that came from the Creedmonts’ house—”

“She’ll know that they didn’t steal any of it, after Colin got the key,” Mom countered. “She’ll be our witness.”

Roddy snapped his fingers, acting as though he’d just figured out some scientific principle.

“Because we know Steve would have security video of that storage unit from at least the past few weeks,” he said. “And there’d be no sign of Colin or his mom—or me or Nevaeh—carrying anything out of that unit.” He winced. “But before that, the entire ten years Dad had that storage unit key sitting on a shelf in his office . . . couldn’t this end up looking really bad for Dad? And maybe the rest of us Greeveys, too?”

Is that what Mom meant by “This isn’t just about Colin anymore”? Nevaeh wondered.

Mom didn’t even flinch. Which . . . probably meant she’d been thinking that all along.

“Sharla knows our family,” Mom said evenly. “We’ll be fine.”

Still, they drove to the self-storage unit in silence. Sharla met them there. She was a tall, athletic-looking woman who was wearing yoga pants today, not her usual uniform. And Nevaeh was relieved to see that Sharla was driving her regular car—a red Honda Fit. She wasn’t pulling up in a sheriff’s deputy car with lights blazing and a siren blaring.

“I’m not here in any official capacity,” Sharla said, getting out of her car. “I just happened to drive by, and saw a friend, and stopped for a chat.”

“Thank you,” Mom said.

Nevaeh wasn't entirely sure what *that* was about. But she held her breath as Roddy unlocked the storage unit door and raised it high. Just like before, a few empty boxes dropped to the ground from the pile lined up along the opening. But Roddy quickly cleared other boxes away to reveal the rest of the unit.

As far as Nevaeh could tell, everything looked the same as before: the crib, the bookshelf, the changing table, the cutesy animal designs on the wall hangings and rug. The stuffed animals and other toys artfully arranged throughout. It could have been the backdrop for some Instagram reel about decorating a room for a new baby.

Sharla let out a whistle.

"Okay, I'm used to weird, but I haven't seen anything like this before," she said. "Was the guy *trying* to scare off his ex-wife with his desperation? Or . . . I've heard that in some high-rent areas, people try to live out of storage units—that's not what happened here, is it? Nobody actually lived inside this unit, did they?"

"Not Colin or his mother," Nevaeh told her. "I guess we don't know about his dad."

"Colin's father told Dad and me he was going right back to Kentucky as soon as he unloaded all the furniture," Roddy reminded her. "And he gave Dad the key, so how would he have gotten back in?"

Nevaeh decided not to speak up and add, *And he was in prison for five years. So we know he wasn't here then.*

"Well, if I was searching this space for stolen property—which I'm not, because I'm just here visiting a friend—I'd look for something out of place," Sharla said. "I mean, more out of place than a luxurious baby's room set up in a storage unit."

Sharla "just happened" to have rubber gloves in her car, and she handed out pairs to Mom, Roddy, and Nevaeh. Mom checked the drawers of the baby's dresser. Roddy gingerly began lifting the books one by one from the bookshelf.

Nevaeh went to the toys.

All the wooden blocks seemed to be ordinary painted ones. The rocking horse had a perfectly braided mane and tail, which seemed strange and amazing to Nevaeh. But she figured that was just because she wasn't used to seeing toys like that in brand-new, mint condition.

Then she picked up a stuffed gray corduroy elephant and . . . it seemed strangely lumpy. She turned it over, and the seam where the two front legs joined looked a little loose. Which was weird, because the elephant looked so new, so un-played-with. Nevaeh poked a finger into the seam, pulling out threads that didn't quite match the rest of the elephant. She picked at the threads, making a hole.

And then she saw something green inside the stuffed elephant.

Green, and . . . rolled up?

Money.

Nevaeh reached in and pulled out a thick wad of cash. And then another one. And another.

And then Mom and Roddy and Sharla were beside her, snatching up stuffed tigers and stuffed bears and stuffed zebras and crying out, "There's money here, too!" "And here!"

And then Sharla pulled all the Greeveys away from all the money and stuffed animals, and completely out of the storage unit.

"A lot of these are hundred-dollar bills, and there could easily be hundreds of them," she said. "That officially puts this whole dilemma above my pay grade."

"Are you saying this is a crime scene?" Nevaeh asked. "Maybe it's just that Colin and his mom are rich now. Maybe—"

"If you have this much cash and you got it honestly and legally," Sharla said, "you put it in a bank. You don't hide it inside a bunch of kids' toys in a self-storage unit in Groveview, Ohio."

Mom had her phone to her ear again. But she was shaking her head.

"Still no answer," she said. "I guess the Creedmonts' phones are still turned off and sitting in a kitchen drawer."

"And," Sharla said ominously, "if someone got this much money by legal means, then nobody would have to run away."

Colin Listens

Colin stood frozen in the Walmart parking lot. He was done with looking for his dad. He wanted to be done with even *thinking* about his dad.

But he'd barely finished hanging up Mr. Torres's phone before it began ringing again.

"Noooo . . .," Colin moaned.

He'd forgotten he wasn't using his own phone. He'd been so caught up in the moment—in wanting to say out loud, "I'm his son"—that he hadn't thought about the woman calling back. He hadn't thought about how she might call again and again. For now, Colin could silence her, but the next time, Mr. Torres would answer.

And what would the strange woman—Colin's father's new wife—tell Mr. Torres?

How completely would she ruin Colin's life in Groveview?

Delete and block, Colin thought.

But what if it didn't work the same way on Mr. Torres's phone as on Colin's?

Colin glanced up quickly: Mr. Torres was almost done strapping the second twin back into the car. Colin had barely any time left before Mr. Torres would walk back, reaching for his phone. Colin really didn't want to be caught searching through Mr. Torres's settings.

He answered the phone instead.

"Please don't call this number again," he hissed into it. "This isn't even my phone. It's just a . . . a stranger's. I borrowed it. So you can't reach me here ever again."

"Colin, please!" the woman cried. "Is your name still Colin? Please don't hang up again! Your father always wanted to hear from you so badly.

He'd never forgive me if I didn't at least try . . . Are you okay? Is your mother okay? Please, just let me talk to your mother!"

"Why would my mother want to talk to her ex-husband's new wife?" Colin asked.

"I . . . I think she will." Mrs. Creekman's voice faltered. "Tell her it's Marcia Flood. She'll remember me. We were . . . we were innocent victims together."

Flood, Colin thought. *As in, Otis Flood.*

That was the man who'd been a criminal along with Colin's dad. The pharmacist who'd filled the prescriptions Colin's dad had illegally sold to his patients.

And then he'd been the man who testified against Colin's dad, in order to get less prison time himself.

Maybe Marcia Flood was related to Otis. A sister, maybe? A daughter? An ex-wife?

Geez, she knows how to pick her relatives, Colin thought.

The words "innocent victims" sunk in.

How could this Marcia woman be innocent if she'd married Colin's dad *knowing* he was a criminal?

"And before that, we were friends!" Mrs. Creekman went on.

"None of this makes sense," Colin moaned.

"It does—ultimately," Mrs. Creekman said. Her tone was soothing now, extra kind. "I don't know what you've been told or how you got this number. But I know everything about your dad's life is a lot to absorb. If you don't know about his last five years, you don't know the whole story. And neither does your mom. *Please* hand her the phone. The two of us really need to talk."

"My mom's not here," Colin said. "Stop calling."

Someone touched his shoulder—Mr. Torres. Colin jerked back so hard, he almost dropped the phone. Quickly, he stabbed his finger against the screen to hang up.

Then he gulped and asked Mr. Torres, "Do you get a lot of spam calls? I probably shouldn't have answered, but they kept calling, so I thought it might be important."

Mr. Torres glanced at the phone screen and made a face.

"Yeah, that's not a number I recognize," he said. "But, Colin, let me give you two pieces of advice. First, never tell anyone over the phone

anything like ‘My mom’s not here.’ And secondly, have you ever heard of this great cell phone feature called ‘delete and block’?”

Then Colin had to pretend to be fascinated by Mr. Torres’s painstaking step-by-step demonstration. Still, he could say at the end of it with absolute sincerity, “Thank you! Thank you! I’m so glad you’ll never hear from that number again!”

Mr. Torres patted Colin’s shoulder and beamed.

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “You’re just giving me practice for when the twins are your age—I’ll add this to my list of things to teach them someday.”

Why did some kids get dads who kept lists of things to teach them, and Colin had gotten a criminal?

“Colin, you look sad again,” Mr. Torres said. “Did you reach your mom?”

“I know exactly where she is now,” Colin said. “Don’t worry about me.” He flashed a grin that he hoped would look completely carefree—just the smile of an ordinary kid on a summer Saturday, with nothing but easily solved, ordinary kid problems. “You’ve got your hands full with the twins.”

But Mr. Torres kept his hand on Colin’s shoulder, his dark eyes fixed on Colin’s face.

He’d fallen for the spam story, but he didn’t seem to believe Colin’s grin.

“You know, my dad died when I was little,” Mr. Torres said. “So I grew up without a father, too. My mom did a great job, but I was also lucky to have lots of uncles to teach me how to be a man. They weren’t always right about everything—they tried to tell me a boy should never cry, and I will *not* be passing that idiocy on to my sons. But anytime you feel like you need to talk to an honorary uncle, you call me. My boys can share.”

He was going to make Colin start crying all over again.

“I, uh, thank you, Mr. Torres,” Colin said. “Uh . . .” A blue SUV turning into the parking lot caught his eye, and he barely managed to hold back a panicky gulp. “Oh—there’s my mom now. Bye!”

He took off running toward Mom’s car, all the time praying that Mom hadn’t seen him talking to Mr. Torres.

Play it cool, he told himself.

Mom stopped for him and he scrambled in. He turned to face her, trying to give her a more convincing grin than he'd just used with Mr. Torres.

Pretend you followed every one of her instructions, he told himself. Act like the only thing you could possibly feel guilty about is eating some unhealthy, sugary treat from the Walmart bakery. And . . .

"Oh, Colin," Mom said. "What happened?"

Because of course she saw right through him. Of course she could tell that his eyes were still teary. It wasn't that she could read his mind—she didn't know that he'd just finished reading his father's letter, just finished talking to his father's new wife, just finished hearing a kind offer from a man who was a good dad and would be a great honorary uncle.

But she could tell that *something* had happened.

Colin didn't panic. But he also didn't play it cool. He was so tired of pretending. He'd already used up all his acting ability on the Walmart sidewalk.

"Do you remember a woman named Marcia Flood?" he asked. "I need you to tell me everything about her."

Hidden Treasures

Nevaeh's mom took three steps back, away from her friend Sharla, the sheriff's deputy. Mom's single crutch kept sliding on the gravel driveway outside the self-storage unit.

"Sharla, I don't want to be stupid here," Mom said, somehow managing to look as though she was standing firm and strong anyhow. "If you tell me we should have a lawyer present before Roddy and Nevaeh answer any questions, I'll hire one right away. What would you do if this was your family?"

"And if I'd just had a wreck that already set us back financially?" Sharla asked, frowning sympathetically. "And if my husband and I were too proud to ask any of our lawyer friends to help us out for free?"

"Exactly," Mom said. She flashed a glance toward Nevaeh. "And, no, Nevaeh, this is not your fault, either."

Sharla seemed to be watching this exchange closely.

"I thought the accident was my fault," Nevaeh said in a small voice. "Because Mom was dropping me off . . . here . . . right before she fell asleep and wrecked."

Sharla dipped her chin up and down, as if dismissing that guilt.

"Look, I've known you Greeveys my whole life," Sharla said. "I know none of you are guilty of anything. But if I were you . . . I'd swallow some of that pride and ask a lawyer friend for help, anyway."

"What about Colin and his mom?" Nevaeh asked. "I know they're not guilty, either. But Colin's mom doesn't know as many people in Groveview as my parents do."

Sharla sighed.

“I need to get into a different line of work,” she muttered. “Look, when everyone who’s *officially* on duty shows up to investigate this, I’ll emphasize that Felicia Creedmont was never suspected of any wrongdoing, and was in fact in danger herself. We won’t even release her name to the media, if there are concerns that that would tip off anyone who wanted to take revenge on her. Let’s just make sure, first off, that we’re making all the right assumptions. Roddy, can I get you to identify a mug shot of Colin’s dad? This is just for me, your mom’s friend. Not the county sheriff’s department yet.”

Sharla walked back to her car. Mom hobbled after her, as if she wanted to have an adults-only conversation. Nevaeh started to sneak after them, but Mom turned back and shook her head warningly, clearly indicating, *No eavesdropping allowed*.

How did she know what I was going to try? Nevaeh wondered.

Nevaeh did not have the patience for standing around and doing nothing while the adults took over.

“You don’t need to wait for Sharla to come back with any mug shot photos on her work phone,” she told Roddy. “I can show you pictures of Colin’s dad myself.”

She would have walked back into the storage unit and pulled out the photo album, but that was probably crime scene evidence now, too. So instead, she pulled out her phone.

“That won’t work,” Roddy said. “Prilla and I were doing all sorts of searches last night, and we couldn’t find out anything about Colin’s dad.”

Nevaeh felt a little thrill at knowing more than her older brother and sister did.

“That’s because Mrs. Creedmont changed her last name when she left Colin’s dad,” Nevaeh told Roddy. “Before that, their name was Creekman. Colin’s dad was Franklin Creekman.”

She found a news site story with the headline “Doctor, Pharmacist Arrested in Drug Case,” with pictures of both Dr. Creekman and Otis Flood, side by side. She showed Roddy.

“Yeah, that’s him,” Roddy said, glancing quickly. “The bald guy.”

Nevaeh peered down at the screen, as if the wrong picture had come up while she wasn’t looking. But there was tall, thin Dr. Creekman with his headful of dark, curly hair, so much like Colin’s. And there, beside him, was Otis Flood—shorter, heavier, older . . . and bald.

“No, look again,” Nevaeh insisted. “Look at the faces. I guess Dr. Creekman could have gone bald between the time this picture was taken and when you saw him. Or maybe he shaved his head. But this other guy is Colin’s dad. The one on the left.”

Roddy took Nevaeh’s phone and squinted intently this time. He stretched his fingers across the screen, zooming in. He peered at the phone so long, he might have been studying each individual pixel.

But when he looked up, he was still squinting in confusion.

“I guess that tall guy does look more like Colin,” Roddy agreed. “But the other guy, the one who’s bald in this picture? That’s the man I met. That’s the man who rented this storage unit.”

“What? I don’t understand!” Nevaeh protested. “What name did Dad use, talking to the man? What did he tell you to call him?”

“I’m sure it was Frank,” Roddy said. “Hey, maybe that picture is just labeled wrong.”

Nevaeh went back to her search page and flipped through photo after photo after photo for Roddy. Every picture showed Franklin Creekman with curly black hair, and Otis Flood completely bald.

“Okay, okay!” Roddy protested. “You’ve proved your point. It wasn’t Franklin Creekman who told us he was Colin’s dad and Felicia’s husband and left all the money and other stuff. It was Otis Flood. And—”

Nevaeh finished the sentence for Roddy: “And he was lying.”

Mom Remembers

“Marcia Flood?” Mom repeated, hitting the brakes and jerking her gaze toward Colin. “Where did you hear that name?”

Someone honked behind them. Colin was still years away from getting a driver’s license, but even he knew it was a bad idea to slam on your brakes in the middle of a Walmart parking lot on a busy Saturday morning.

Mom frowned and pulled into an empty parking space. She turned off the engine. For a moment, she sat staring off into the distance. Colin had a feeling she wasn’t really studying the soybean field planted between the Walmart parking lot and the ugly, run-down Pinewood Motel.

Or maybe she truly was staring at the Pinewood Motel. Staring hard.

Finally she turned to Colin.

“You know,” she said flatly. “You found out. About your father.”

Colin gulped. But he didn’t deny it.

“I know what he did. I know his best friend testified against him. I know he went to prison. I listened to part of a podcast about him. And . . . I know he got remarried. To a woman named Marcia Flood.”

These did not seem like the most important things to say to Mom. They were just the words that came out first.

“But I don’t know if he loved me.”

There. That was what Colin wanted to say.

Mom reached out and touched Colin’s cheek. She let her hand fall to clutch his hand.

Colin let her. He twisted his hand in her grasp and held on just as tightly as she did.

“Oh, Colin,” she said. “The day you were born, I would have said you were getting the best, most loving father ever. He was so proud of you.

Those first few weeks, he was the one who got up with you at night, to let me sleep. If you'd asked me then, 'Does Frank love Colin?' I would have laughed in your face. 'Of course! Of course! Forever!' But . . ."

"But what?"

Colin wasn't sure Mom would answer. Even now. He'd had twelve years of Mom not answering questions, and that's what he'd been trained to expect.

But today was different.

Mom squeezed Colin's hand.

"But how much can you really love your own child when you're doing so much to ruin other people's lives just for money? Money you don't even need?"

Colin remembered the line from his father's letter: "Your mom probably told you I did it for the money. . . ." No, she hadn't told him that. But she was telling him now.

"Other children are orphans now, because of drugs your father prescribed illegally," Mom said. "Drugs he and Otis Flood *sold*—even to drug dealers—when they both knew it was wrong. And some of the kids who still have their parents . . . those parents became zombies because of those drugs. Their lives were ruined, too."

"I know," Colin whispered. "I know what he did."

Was it terrible that he didn't want to think about any of those other children, any of the people whose lives his father helped destroy?

Mom kept her hand steady on Colin's.

"This is why I never wanted to tell you," she said. "Because I knew this conversation would never go anywhere. Would never fix anything. As your mom, I'm supposed to have answers. But *I* can't get past what he did. I can't forgive him."

"What if . . . what if he repented?" Colin asked. "I mean, after the last time he talked to you, whenever that was. What if he was sorry? For real? What could he have ever done to get you to forgive him?"

Colin had probably never said the word "repented" before in his life. He'd once had a friend whose mother watched church services on TV while Colin was there playing. That was probably the only reason Colin even knew the word. Those TV preachers were always talking about people repenting their sins.

It felt like a word that belonged in somebody else's religion, somebody else's life.

Because I never knew what my dad did, he thought. *I never knew anyone whose crimes seemed unforgivable.*

Except, he pretty much had known all along that his mother hadn't forgiven his father. He'd seen that his entire life, even if he hadn't understood.

"Repented," Mom repeated. She gave a sarcastic snort. "He would have had to change a *lot* for that to happen. The last time I spoke to him, he was still saying it was unfair that anyone would doubt him, still saying he was going to hire such a good lawyer, it wouldn't matter what he'd done."

Colin shifted in his seat, and the letter he'd found in the heart lock rustled in his pocket. Could Mom hear that?

Did he want her to?

If she just saw the words "But I'm different now," would that convince her?

Mom was staring off through the windshield again.

"It's just . . .," she said. She tapped a finger against the steering wheel. "I'd have to believe that either your father changed a lot—or Marcia did—for her to marry him."

Colin was having a hard time keeping track of the conversation. Or even who was who.

"But this Marcia . . . is she related to the other guy who was a criminal with dad?" Colin asked. "Otis Flood? Maybe that means she's just a criminal, too."

Mom gave a harsh laugh.

"Marcia was Otis's daughter," she muttered. "Would you want people assuming *you're* a criminal because you're related to your father?"

Colin remembered the shame that had rushed over him, reading about his father's crimes. Colin had had nothing to do with any of it—he hadn't even known about his father's crimes until yesterday.

But he'd still worried about other people finding out. He'd been afraid of even his *friends* thinking worse of him because of what his father had done.

"That's not fair!" Colin protested.

“No.” Mom shook her head sadly. “No, it’s not. So now maybe you understand. . . . It’s never fair to judge someone based on what their relatives did. I always liked Marcia. I *trusted* her. But what kind of a judge of character am I? I trusted your father, too, once upon a time. And Otis, Marcia’s father. Who was a criminal *and* betrayed your dad.”

Colin’s head spun. They were talking about this. They were really talking.

“Mom, you can’t go through life never trusting anybody again,” Colin said. “People aren’t like things, that you can get rid of as soon as they stop working perfectly.”

It hit him suddenly, what had always bothered him about his mother’s job, the way she was always so determined to throw things away.

“Haven’t you noticed?” he asked bitterly. “*I’m* not perfect, either.”

“This isn’t about you,” Mom said. “You’re a kid—of course you’re not perfect. Of course I will always love you.”

“I’m the only thing in our house that doesn’t have to be perfect then,” he said. “The only *person* you don’t mostly shut out. And you shut me out a lot. We know lots of people you can trust, that you don’t trust. All the Greeveys, not just Nevaeh’s mom. Derek, Daryl, and Deepak. Pretty much everybody else in Groveview. Mom, we can’t run away again just because you’re scared. We’ll end up having to do that again and again and again.”

When he’d started talking, he hadn’t realized he was going to end on that plea. But that was why everything mattered about his father.

It wasn’t really the past he was concerned about.

It was his future.

Colin pulled his father’s letter and the heart lock out of his pocket. He handed them both to Mom.

“This was attached to the rusty lock in Pittsburgh,” he said. “See? It’s labeled ‘For my beloved son, Colin.’ So I cut it open.”

For now, he didn’t want to talk about how he’d known to look for a lock on a bridge. He didn’t want to talk about the package on the porch, the key he’d found, or anything else he’d seen in the storage unit. He just wanted his mother to read his father’s letter.

Mom gasped, but took the letter from Colin. Silently, Colin watched her read.

“Oh, Colin,” she moaned. And then, “Oh, Frank. Oh . . .”

“See?” Colin asked, his voice cracking. “See?”

Mom lowered the letter.

“This sentence,” she said. “‘But now I can’t find you, either.’ Colin, I want to believe all of this, too, but that sentence is a lie. Your father knew I’d changed our last name to Creedmont. He knew we were living in Groveview.”

Colin’s heart sank.

“You told him?” he asked. “So . . . so I can’t believe any of that?”

Mom shook her head impatiently.

“No, I didn’t tell him directly. We weren’t talking at that point. But both Marcia and Otis Flood knew, and would have told him, because . . . oh.” She put her hand over her mouth. Her face drained of color. “Oh, oh, oh . . .”

“What?” Colin asked.

Mom started the engine of her SUV again.

“What are you doing?” Colin asked. “Where are you going?”

Mom turned to look him directly in the eye.

“We’re going to go see Marcia Flood.”

What Nevaeh Found Out

“We’ve got to figure all this out before Sharla calls in the whole sheriff’s department,” Nevaeh told Roddy. She remembered what Sharla had said: that discovering all the money had put the whole case above her pay grade. “And maybe the state police and the FBI, too.”

“You and Colin are the Mystery Solvers,” Roddy said. “If you want to know things like, ‘Does paper money decay over the course of ten years?’ then I can help. Otherwise . . .” He shrugged. “You might as well ask me to repair a broken toaster. And you know I’m terrible at that.”

Roddy had fixed their toaster at the beginning of the summer, and now it did nothing but burn bread.

“No, Roddy, you’re good for more than that,” Nevaeh said. “Steve likes you better than me, right?”

“Steve who owns this whole self-storage place?” Roddy asked. “I don’t know. He doesn’t *dislike* me.”

“Then you’re ahead of me,” Nevaeh said. “Come on.”

She shot a glance toward Mom and Sharla, to make sure they wouldn’t notice if Roddy and Nevaeh slunk away. Fortunately, the two women were deep in conversation. Nevaeh tiptoed across the gravel and around the corner of the self-storage building. Roddy followed. Once they were out of sight of Sharla and Mom, Nevaeh started texting Colin as she walked: **Call me as soon as you see this!**

Maybe Colin and his mom had gone back to their house and picked up their phones, after all. Maybe he could see his texts on some laptop or iPad even if he was still . . . somewhere else.

He didn’t reply. Nevaeh tried not to think about where exactly he might be, or why he wasn’t answering.

What if there isn't time for us to wait for the sheriff's department or the state police or the FBI or whoever to solve this? she wondered.

She and Roddy had a little luck on their side, at least: Steve Owens was in the office, a room that was unfortunately painted the same bright orange as all the garage-style doors of the self-storage units. He didn't seem to be working very hard. He had his feet up on his desk and was watching a baseball game on the giant TV fastened over the door.

"Ah, Greevey spawn!" he said. "What can I do you for? Does your dad need something?"

"We're here to help *you*," Nevaeh said. "We think we found stolen property in one of your storage units, and we figured you'd want to look like a hero when the cops show up."

"Did one of you call the cops?" Steve asked, clutching his heart and looking a little panicked.

"Mom called Sharla," Roddy added.

"*Deputy Sharla*?" Steve asked, wincing. "She's the biggest stickler for rules, ever."

Nevaeh looked to Roddy, because she knew Steve would take their next question better from him than from her. She and Steve had had a big disagreement back at the beginning of the summer, and as far as she knew, he still hadn't forgiven her.

"We're here to offer a deal," Roddy said. "We'll give you some background so you can make sure your records are in order when the cops get here. All you have to do is tell us who rented unit thirty-two and when he rented it."

"You know I guarantee my customers total privacy," Steve said, with what sounded like fake indignation.

"Oh, we'll just stand over here watching the baseball game with you while you work," Nevaeh offered. "You don't have to *say* anything."

She stepped over by Steve's desk, where she had a view of the TV—and of the screen of his ancient-looking desktop computer.

Steve sat without moving for a moment. But then he enlarged a rectangle on his screen that seemed to be security camera footage. The grainy video showed Mom and Sharla just as Sharla gestured toward Steve's office.

Steve jumped back as if his keyboard had given him a shock.

“What? You didn’t tell me Sharky Sharla’s already *here!*” he exclaimed.

“You might want to find all your records for unit thirty-two,” Nevaeh suggested.

Steve clicked out of the security footage and called up what looked like a rental form.

The name at the top was Franklin Creeman.

“Is that a typo?” Nevaeh asked. “Was that supposed to be *Creekman* or *Creedmont*?”

“It definitely isn’t Otis Flood,” Roddy said.

“But, say, if some law enforcement person asked self-storage areas to check to see if they had any units rented to someone named Franklin Creekman, *this* would never show up,” Nevaeh muttered. She tapped her chin thoughtfully.

Meanwhile, Roddy was stroking the scruffy almost-beard that he hadn’t shaved this morning. Between the two of them, they probably looked like Sherlock Holmes wannabes.

Steve did not look impressed.

“I don’t know what the two of you are talking about,” Steve said. “My customers fill out the form themselves. Online. If they’re in a hurry and don’t fill it out right, that’s not my fault.”

“Don’t you check ID?” Roddy asked.

“Of course I do . . . usually.” Steve let his fingers hover over the keyboard. “Just for argument’s sake, though, let’s say that, uh . . .” He squinted at the date on the screen and seemed to be trying to do math in his head. “Let’s say that about ten years ago, there was one time I forgot. Are you saying that I would have seen ID for some guy named Franklin *Creekman* or would it have been Franklin *Creedmont*?”

Nevaeh and Roddy exchanged glances.

“We really don’t know what ID he would have shown you,” Nevaeh said.

It suddenly felt like what they were doing was wrong. Wouldn’t this be called falsifying records?

Couldn’t that be a crime, too? Just as much as if Otis Flood had used a fake ID?

“You said you would help me!” Steve protested.

“Let’s look at the rest of that form,” Roddy suggested. “Where did this guy live?”

Steve scrolled down. The address listed was a post office box in some town Nevaeh had never heard of: Downers Bluff, Kentucky. She quickly googled it: it was half an hour from Eberly, the town where Franklin Creekman had been a doctor and Otis Flood had run a drugstore.

“Isn’t it cheating to use a post office box for the address?” she moaned.

“Lots of people do that while they’re in the midst of moving, so they don’t have their mail getting lost being forwarded back and forth,” Steve said. He sounded defensive, as if Nevaeh had accused him of a crime. “And guess who uses storage units a lot? People who are moving.”

“So you’re willing to believe that this guy has been in the midst of moving for the past ten years?” Roddy asked.

“I don’t ask my customers why they’re renting a storage unit,” Steve said self-righteously. Nevaeh knew that probably wasn’t true. Steve was one of the nosiest people she knew.

“And you didn’t ask why some guy from Kentucky put a bunch of stuff in your storage unit hours and hours away, and left it there for ten years?” Roddy asked.

“Hey, as long as my customers pay, I don’t care what they do,” Steve countered.

“Maybe you shouldn’t put it that way when Sharla comes over here asking questions,” Nevaeh advised. “But who did pay?”

Steve scrolled down a little further.

“It’s all done automatically—my favorite setup.” A little of his usual sleazy gloating came back. “I don’t have to do anything, and the money just keeps rolling in, month after month.”

Roddy bent closer to the screen.

“The payment comes from something called ‘the FC Trust’?” he asked. “What’s that mean?”

Steve waved a hand airily.

“A trust is . . . well, it’s something rich people have sometimes,” he said. “I think it avoids taxes, or something like that. *I’m* not rich enough to know. Though, ‘Steve’s Self-Storage Trust Fund’ has a ring to it, don’t you think?”

“It also avoids anyone knowing who really owns it,” Nevaeh grumbled. FC could stand for any variation of Franklin Creekman’s name.

Or it could stand for Felicia Creedmont, she thought.

“What’s that at the bottom of the form?” Roddy asked. “Under ‘Other Instructions’?”

“Oh, it’s a backup contact,” Steve said. “You Greeveys know from your dad’s business that sometimes people stop paying on their storage units. *And* sometimes they just disappear off the face of the Earth. If there’s a backup contact number listed, I call that person, too, and give them a chance to pay before I call in the old Junk King to clean things out.” He narrowed his eyes at Nevaeh and Roddy. “You know your family benefits from all this, just as much as I do.”

Nevaeh ignored the taunt. She reached out and scrolled further down, so they could all see who the backup contact was for unit 32.

It was a familiar name.

“Felicia Creedmont?” Roddy exploded. “Funny—*this* name is spelled correctly. I think she was being set up!”

“For what?” Nevaeh asked. “To be rich?” She gulped. “Or to be arrested?”

On the Way to Marcia's

“Shouldn’t you call this Marcia person first, to let her know we’re coming?” Colin asked weakly as his mother drove out of the Walmart parking lot. Her SUV picked up speed, zooming past the dumpy, run-down Pinewood Motel. “And shouldn’t we stop and get our stuff before we go?”

He didn’t care that much about anything left behind at the Pinewood Motel. Since Mom had taken away the rusted heart lock, his duffel bag contained nothing but clothes. What he really missed was his phone, and he had no idea where Mom had taken *that*.

But if he had his phone, he could look up every reference to Marcia or Otis Flood. He could prepare. And he could text Nevaeh, to get her help.

Suddenly, Nevaeh’s help was what he wanted most.

But Mom only sped up.

“I already packed up our things and checked out of the motel,” Mom said. “And, no, I don’t want to call Marcia. I want the element of surprise today.”

She clutched the steering wheel with both hands, her knuckles turning white. She kept her gaze fixed directly ahead.

“Are you . . . are you thinking straight now?” Colin asked. “You said last night that in the morning, maybe . . .”

Mom took a long time to answer.

“I’m not sure I’ve been able to think straight for the past twelve years,” she said, with a bitter laugh. “Not since the day the cops showed up while we were eating dinner, you and me and your dad. You were in your high chair, and your dad and I were taking turns feeding you. . . . You had a spoon shaped like an airplane, and we ‘flew’ it into your mouth. . . .”

Colin froze. He'd seen that spoon. It had been in the storage unit beside the engraved silver cup.

"Mom . . .," he began.

But she seemed lost in memories.

"Do you know what my biggest worry was when the doorbell rang that night?" she asked. "That the meat loaf would get cold. I'd made meat loaf for dinner. Meat loaf!"

"You never make meat loaf," Colin said. She gave him a look, and he figured it out. "Oh. Because of that night."

Was he supposed to feel sad now about meat loaf? He didn't remember ever having it before. Not anywhere. It seemed like one of those foods that people talked about, but never actually ate.

"And I never used that spoon to feed you again," Mom said. "And I was never again so innocent and ignorant. . . . For twelve years, I tried not to even *think* about any of this. I was just looking at my next step. How to keep going. How to survive. How to make enough money to give you a normal childhood. But you never had a normal childhood, did you?"

"Uh . . . normalish," Colin said. "But what's normal, anyway? Nevaeh's dad gave her a crown made out of those old silver CDs and expected her to wear it out in public. Ree lives in a funeral home. Prilla and Roddy want to go to college, but they won't tell their parents. Daryl is afraid his dad is going to make him follow in his footsteps and become a, uh, poop doctor." Actually, all three of the teenagers who helped his mom in her Possession Curation business claimed to be nerdy and weird. But off the top of his head, Colin couldn't remember the reasons for Deepak and Derek. He thought all three of them were pretty amazing.

So were Prilla, Roddy, Ree, and Nevaeh.

He felt a little pang thinking about all his friends.

"We're coming back, right?" he asked. "We're not leaving Groveview forever, are we?"

"I don't know yet," Mom admitted. "I don't want to move, but . . ."

Colin felt like he couldn't say anything without pushing her in the wrong direction. The very air in the SUV felt charged. Explosive.

"Want to know why we ended up in Groveview in the first place?" Mom asked. "It's where I ran out of gas."

"What?" Colin asked. "Why didn't you just go to a gas station?"

“You don’t know anything about what my life was like then, do you?” Mom said, with another brittle, humorless laugh.

“Why would I?” Colin complained. “Until this summer, you never told me anything! And you’re still keeping secrets, aren’t you?”

Mom nodded slowly, her eyes on the road ahead. They were fully out in the countryside now, passing field after field of soybeans and corn.

“You should know this part,” she said. “So you understand what your father did to us. And how lucky we were to escape.”

Colin waited.

“I was running away,” she said. “I’d filed for divorce—I wasn’t even *speaking* to your father at that point. But people were still . . . suspicious . . . of me, too. There was money missing from his office accounts—hundreds of thousands of dollars—and rumors were flying that he’d cheated some of the drug dealers he’d begun working with. So the drug dealers were out to get him—and out to get everyone connected to him, to use that as leverage to get that money. I’d gotten death threats, just the same as Frank. You and I were in so much danger.”

“So we needed to go into witness protection,” Colin said. That explained why Mom had changed their names. This still felt like something that would happen in someone else’s life—maybe Mom had succeeded in making him feel like he had a “normal” life, after all. Or, normal enough.

But Mom snorted derisively.

“No—we weren’t eligible for ‘witness’ protection,” she corrected him. “We weren’t witnesses. I didn’t know anything about Frank’s crimes, so I was useless to the government. Witness protection is only for people who can help the legal case. No, you and I were just . . . collateral damage. Extra victims that almost nobody could sympathize with, because hadn’t we benefited, too, from your father’s crimes? Colin, we were living so well by the standards of Eberly, Kentucky, twelve years ago. We were the richest people in town. But none of it was worth it. *Nothing* would have been worth what your father put us through. Or the pain he caused for all those other people. Or . . . the fear I had to live with, always wondering who was looking for me, who might be tracking me thinking *I* had the missing money. When, really, I left Eberly without taking so much as a penny of your father’s money. Even the money he earned legally.”

Colin thought about the engraved silver cup he and Nevaeh had found in the storage unit. He remembered how eager he'd been to see that as a sign that his father had loved him.

"But we did get away," Colin reminded her. "We haven't had drug dealers or anyone else chasing us or finding us for the past twelve years." Quickly, he added, "You don't even know that they're chasing us now. You're just afraid that they might."

He expected Mom to protest, but she nodded.

"This brings it all back," she said. "I thought I could just forget, but . . . Colin, what if I totally messed up, letting my guard down? Going back to see Leila, going to prove my identity to that attorney . . . That missing money is still out there, and so are the people who wanted it. I know that running away twelve years ago made me look suspicious. What if everything about the Pittsburgh trip was a trap?"

She glanced nervously at the rearview mirror, as if she feared someone was following them even now. Colin turned around to look, too. There wasn't another car in sight.

"You think a box on a porch and two locks on a bridge were part of a trap?" Colin asked incredulously. "Mom, those were from Dad! Or, at least, the box was from someone who wanted to help Dad . . ."

He squirmed, remembering that he still hadn't told Mom about the storage unit the key in the box had led to. But she was already acting so paranoid—he couldn't freak her out even more.

And that storage unit was so creepy, and I still don't know who gave me the key. . . .

"Colin, I'm sorry, but your father was a criminal," Mom said grimly. "And he was *friends* with criminals. Criminals who don't care who they hurt to get what they want . . ."

Colin slumped in his seat.

"You're still just guessing that someone bad is after us," he said stubbornly.

Mom reached over and patted his leg.

"Believe me, I don't *want* to relive everything from twelve years ago," she said with an ache in her voice. "I'm trying not to think that way. It was so horrifying, always looking back over my shoulder, never knowing who to trust. . . . It was like I had to make up my own DIY witness protection. I felt like I was doing everything alone."

“Sorry I couldn’t help,” Colin said, wincing.

Mom didn’t answer. Colin peeked over at her and saw that her lip was trembling. She seemed to be fighting back tears.

He wouldn’t be able to stand it if she did start to cry.

“Hey—didn’t you say I spit up a lot as a baby?” Colin asked, trying for a jovial tone. “I could have, I don’t know, vomited on anyone who tried to attack us. So you weren’t alone. I would have scared away even the fiercest drug dealer!”

Mom didn’t laugh, the way he’d hoped. Instead, she tilted her head thoughtfully.

“Actually, you did help,” she said. “Everywhere I went, people were more sympathetic to a young mother with a baby. When I ran out of gas here in Groveview, I was down to almost no cash left. I couldn’t use a credit card because I thought those could be traced. I was hoping to make it to a homeless shelter in Columbus—that was my main goal. Sad, isn’t it?”

Colin couldn’t imagine his mother being that desperate. She was always so much in control, so sure of herself. She was so careful with her money—he’d never once worried that they could become homeless.

But maybe everything that happened twelve years ago is why she’s so careful, he thought.

“You know, Groveview seemed like such a random place to end up,” Mom said. “I was traveling on back roads then, just as I am now. I thought driving on interstates might be too obvious. So when I ran out of gas, the nearest building I saw was this rambling old barn, and at first I couldn’t even see there was a house nearby. . . .”

“That’s how everything looks when you come around that curve by the Greeveys’ house,” Colin said. “I’ve always thought that was weird.”

“Yes,” Mom said, and then she stopped.

“Wait—were you right *beside* the Greeveys’ where you ran out of gas?” Colin asked. “Near their house and barn?”

Mom bit her lip and nodded.

“I know you and Nevaeh want her dad and me to get along better,” she said. “But it’s not just about the junk. It’s about that night.”

Without even thinking about it, Colin balled up his fists.

“Mr. Greevey was *mean* to you back then?” he asked. “When you’d run out of gas and you didn’t have enough money and—”

“No—he was *nice*,” Mom said. “Lloyd and Pam both—they couldn’t have been kinder. Lloyd siphoned gas out of his own tank, so I could make it into town. And then he asked if I needed a job, because he was looking for an extra worker. And Pam offered to babysit until I could work out other childcare arrangements. She said she was already taking care of four kids and a baby, so adding another baby wouldn’t even matter. And that is so not true.”

Colin hadn’t known that. He pictured himself and Nevaeh as babies, being put down to sleep in side-by-side cribs.

Because of course the Greeveys would have had an extra old crib available.

“Shouldn’t that make you like Mr. Greevey *better*, if he was so nice when you needed help?” Colin asked.

Mom winced.

“Except that, he never seemed to get past seeing me as some pitiful, desperate woman in need of help,” she muttered. “Even once I had my own business, even once I owned my own house and was doing *fine*, he’d still ask questions like, ‘Have you heard anything from your ex-husband lately? How’s he doing?’ He asked that at the Zucchini Festival just last month. And he never even knew your father! He didn’t know anything about him—because I didn’t want *anyone* to know about him!”

“Mr. Greevey asks questions all the time about everything,” Colin said.

“No.” Mom shook her head stubbornly. “This is different.”

“I guess that’s another reason you’re glad Dad is dead,” Colin muttered.

His words hung in the air. Mom took a turn too tightly, and her tires squealed on the pavement.

“I wanted to be glad,” she murmured. “But I wasn’t. When I got the news, there was a moment when I thought, ‘I’m free! Totally free!’ But it didn’t work that way. His death just brought everything back. And . . . it means that there’s no chance now of us reconciling. Not as husband and wife—I didn’t want that. But it would have been nice for me to . . . to get a letter like the one he wrote to you. It would have been nice if he’d apologized to me. And . . . if I could have said to his face, ‘I forgive you.’”

“But you’re still angry,” Colin said. “You don’t forgive him.”

“Not yet,” Mom said. “But I want to.” She gestured at the road ahead of them, which dipped down between fields that seemed to be nothing but

weeds. “Then this weekend happened, and I’m on the run again. It feels like I’m just back where I was twelve years ago.”

“But this time we’re running *toward* where you used to live,” Colin said. “I still don’t understand. How will it help to go see this Marcia person? I don’t get why you would trust her when you don’t trust anybody else right now.”

Anybody outside of Groveview was what he really meant. What he really wanted to say.

Mom gave him a measuring look, holding his gaze.

“Because,” she said. “Marcia was the person who gave me the money to run away, twelve years ago. She saved our lives.”

Nevaeh, Desperate

Nevaeh stood with her back against the concrete-block main building of Steve's Self-Storage. She kept glancing up to watch various law enforcement vehicles streaming into the parking lot. But in between, she frantically texted Colin.

Where are you?

I have so much to tell you! Please text me back!

Or call!

Or FaceTime!

Right now!

Ok, if you see this and can't text back, at least know this:

Watch out for Otis Flood!

Colin didn't answer.

Nevaeh switched to looking up everything she could find about Otis Flood. She was lucky he had such a weird name—it seemed like everything that came up was truly about the Otis Flood from Eberly, Kentucky.

So she gasped when she found a link labeled "Otis Flood Obituary."

She went back to texting Colin.

Er, no, Otis Flood is dead, I guess

He died a year after leaving all your baby stuff at Steve's Self-Storage

At least, it sure seems like he's the guy who did that

Colin, please please please call so I can tell you the rest

But for now, maybe you need to watch out for anyone connected to Otis Flood?

Colin still didn't answer.

Meeting Marcia

“Whoa,” Colin said, stomping his feet against the floor mat of the car in surprise. “Mom, are you even listening to yourself? You trust this Marcia person *because* she gave you the money to run away and leave Dad? When she was connected to Otis Flood, who betrayed Dad? And then she and Dad got married? Sounds to me like you *shouldn’t* trust her because of all that!”

None of this made any sense. Mom was practical. Mom was levelheaded. Mom was careful.

She wasn’t the type to get involved with a criminal.

Or the type to hide her cell phone and run away . . .

“Mom?” Colin said when she didn’t answer right away.

Mom took her gaze off the road ahead and met Colin’s eyes for the briefest of moments.

“I know how this sounds,” she said. “But . . . there’s more information I found out yesterday. Information that . . . makes it seem like maybe I should forgive your father now. If . . . if the lawyers weren’t lying to me, too. Or if your father and Marcia didn’t lie to the lawyers.”

“Tell me!” Colin begged. “Tell me everything!”

Maybe he still wanted to forgive his father, too.

Mom pursed her lips.

“I’ll start with everything I know for sure,” she said. “I divorced your dad as soon as I could after he was arrested. He was so arrogant, so self-righteous, so . . . so terrible about the people he’d hurt. He acted like their lives didn’t matter as much as his, and—I was just *done*. Having a new baby—having you—I couldn’t imagine ever wanting you to know anything

about him. I wanted him amputated completely from our lives. I thought that was possible.”

“Last week when I was trying to look him up online, I thought maybe he hadn’t even existed,” Colin said. “Because you never told me his real name.”

Mom darted another tiny glance at Colin, before going back to staring at the road ahead of her.

“Maybe I should have told you your father was just an anonymous sperm donor,” she said, almost in a joking tone. “Maybe that would have protected you from any of this.”

“I still would have tried to look him up,” Colin muttered. “People do that. Kids do.”

Mom nodded, accepting that.

“And *I* didn’t want to ever lie to you,” she said. “I vowed I’d never do that. But . . . it’s easier to keep secrets from a baby than from a twelve-year-old. Especially one who’s better than I am at navigating the internet.”

Was Colin supposed to apologize for *that*?

“You never told me I wasn’t allowed to look for him,” he said.

“I thought the name change could protect us from that,” Mom said. “I thought . . . well. I didn’t think about how curious you would be. And I didn’t think about how much else can change in twelve years.”

Colin waited a moment before asking, “Are you convinced now that my dad really did change? Or are you talking about this Marcia person changing?”

“Maybe both?” Mom said. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. “Twelve years ago, I was so sure Marcia was an ally. When your dad and Otis were arrested, Otis’s wife and daughters seemed like the only people who could understand what I was going through. Because they were all innocent, too.”

“But Otis Flood testified against my dad,” Colin said. “He became Dad’s enemy. So how could you have stayed friends with any of the Floods?”

Mom didn’t ask Colin how he’d known that. Maybe she really did understand how much he’d found online.

“That betrayal hadn’t happened yet, the night Marcia showed up at my back door with all the money she’d made from babysitting, and told me I could have it,” Mom said. “All I knew then was that Otis Flood was out of

jail, awaiting trial, but your father was still behind bars, because he was what they call a flight risk. The prosecutors thought he might run away if he had the chance. That made him look guiltier. And people in Eberly were already talking about how maybe everything was Frank's fault, not Otis's. . . ."

She was back to staring straight ahead, as if the curvy road needed all her attention.

"Then what did you find out yesterday?" Colin asked.

"That maybe . . . maybe your dad wasn't as guilty as I thought," Mom said.

"Then he was innocent?" Colin cried out. It was amazing how quickly that came to him—how intensely he wanted to believe that.

"No," Mom said, shaking her head sadly. "I didn't say that. He just . . . oh, let's wait and see what I find out from Marcia. I'll explain everything afterward. Once *I* have everything figured out."

She reached down and flipped the radio on, a clear sign that she wasn't going to tell him anything else. Some country song blared out, full of static. Apparently they were already too far from any radio station for anything to come in clearly.

And we can't connect to anything on our phones because Mom left those behind. . . .

Colin felt like his brain had static, too.

As they drove on and on, the roads got twistier. Eventually they crossed the Ohio River again—this time on a route going south, not east. Colin had marveled at the changes in the landscape on the way to Pittsburgh, only yesterday. But now it wasn't just that the road was windy. Everything that lay ahead of them also felt more and more remote, shadowed by woods and only the occasional house or barn, only the occasional town that seemed to be little more than a crossroads.

Mom drove without consulting a map, without stopping.

Finally they passed a sign that said Welcome to Eberly, and Mom slowed down.

"Are you taking some time to look around?" Colin asked. "This is where we used to live, right?"

"It is," Mom said. "But if I had a choice, I'd hit the gas and get through as fast as I can. It's just that . . . Eberly is a speed trap. When we first moved here, I could have talked my way out of any speeding ticket

because I was Dr. Creekman's wife. That made me a local. They really only gave the speeding tickets to out-of-towners."

"And we're out-of-towners now," Colin said.

"I'm the worst kind," Mom said grimly. "Someone the police chief despises. Someone the whole town hates."

Before Colin had a chance to see anything of Eberly besides a few scattered houses, Mom turned down an alleyway.

"What if I wanted to see the house we used to live in?" Colin asked. "Or the places you and Dad went when . . . when you were happy here?"

"You can look on Google Earth once we're far away," Mom said.

Colin didn't argue. Even though it wasn't the same.

The alleyway connected with a bigger road leading back out into the countryside. Mom turned and sped up again.

And then she turned onto a driveway leading up a hill to a small, tidy redbrick house.

Mom pulled up beside the garage and stopped the car.

"You stay here," Mom said. "Just in case. And stay out of sight until I tell you it's okay to come out."

Colin's stomach plunged with fear.

"Mom, what if something happens to *you*?" he asked. "What if you're wrong about Marcia Flood not being dangerous?"

Mom held his gaze for a moment. Then she pulled something out of her purse and slipped it into his hand.

"I got burner phones for both of us this morning as a precaution," she said. "Here's yours. If you need to, call 911. But only if you have to. Remember, the police chief here hates me."

Was that supposed to be comforting?

Colin would have argued to stay glued to Mom's side. But that "Remember, the police chief here hates me" made him hunch down in his seat.

Mom patted his hand before stepping out of the car and shutting the door.

Peeking over the dashboard, Colin could see Mom walking up the sidewalk to the front door. She reached out to ring the doorbell. Only a few moments later, the screen door opened. Colin heard someone call, "Felicia?"

And then, before Colin got more than a glimpse of the woman on the other side of the door, the woman was out on the sidewalk beside Mom, wrapping her arms around Mom's shoulders for a deep hug. Colin saw Mom's dark curls against a blond head, Mom's crisply pressed shirt engulfed in a floral print.

"Come in! Come in!" the woman urged, her voice holding a lot more Kentucky twang than Colin was used to. She started to gaze around, and Colin hunched down farther, completely out of sight, as the woman asked, "Is it just you?"

"For now," Mom said.

The whole conversation came to Colin as if from a great distance, muffled by the rolled-up windows of the SUV. He waited until he heard the door of the house open and shut again, and then he dared to glance out once more.

The sidewalk in front of the house was empty now. Mom had gone inside.

Colin hesitated only a second before silently easing his car door open, just enough for him to slide down to the concrete driveway. And then, clutching the burner phone tightly in his hand, he crouched down and tiptoed over to hide beneath one of the open windows.

Apparently he was Mom's only protection from danger. So he had to be close enough to hear everything.

What Nevaeh Saw

“It’s like something you’d see on TV,” Roddy whispered.

Nevaeh wasn’t a fan of TV cop shows, but she knew what he meant. The two of them were still standing off to the side, watching as more and more law enforcement officers flooded into Steve’s Self-Storage. It wasn’t just the local sheriff and sheriff’s deputies arriving, either. Based on the badges she’d seen flashed around and the logos on car doors, just about everyone here now was from the United States Drug Enforcement Administration. That meant they weren’t people Nevaeh had known all her life—people who would ruffle her hair fondly or offer her a piece of candy. People who knew her as a good kid. No, the DEA officers all seemed to be hired for their ability to look stoney-faced and grim, to move briskly and with great certainty.

And to act as though they thought everyone was guilty.

“If there’s so much as a hair out of place in that storage area, they’re going to find it,” Nevaeh whispered back nervously to Roddy.

She’d thought her family was organized when they cleared out a storage area or an attic or a basement and sorted the valuable junk from the “even Dad thinks this is garbage” pile. But the DEA agents were a thousand times more methodical, cataloging everything they brought out of the storage area. Even the empty boxes.

“Nevaeh, if you’re worried about some stray hair or fingerprint of your own—or any of mine—showing up there . . . they already *know* we were both in there before anyone from law enforcement got here,” Roddy said in a comforting tone, being all big-brotherly again. “They’re not going to blame us for anything.”

“It’s not us I’m worried about,” Nevaeh muttered.

Just then, she heard one of the DEA agents call from inside the storage unit, “Oh, this is interesting.”

He came out carrying a single envelope.

Nevaeh immediately left Roddy’s side and crept as close as she dared—right up against the yellow “Crime Scene” tape surrounding the whole area.

The officer carrying the envelope seemed so intent on getting it out to his boss that he didn’t notice Nevaeh by the crime scene tape.

“Look at this,” the officer said, pulling a letter from the envelope and holding it out to the woman standing in front of him. “Here’s a letter from Felicia Creedmont saying she’s moved to Groveview. Establishes that connection. Looks like it was sent to Otis Flood’s daughter, Marcia.”

Nevaeh couldn’t help herself.

“That doesn’t mean Felicia Creedmont was guilty of anything!” she cried.

Both the young officer and his more grizzled-looking boss glared at Nevaeh.

“Young lady,” the boss woman said. “We’re going to have to ask you to leave the premises if you’re interfering with our investigation. But . . .” Her face softened. “I assure you. We’re not jumping to conclusions about anyone’s guilt or innocence. We’re just gathering evidence.”

“But what if you’re only getting the wrong evidence?” Nevaeh asked. “What if someone’s being framed?”

“Criminals leave evidence of that, too,” the woman replied. “I assure you, we know what to look for.” She reached into her pocket, then handed Nevaeh a business card. “Give us today to deal with all of this. But tomorrow . . . if there’s any additional information you can think of that you believe would help in this investigation, please let me know.”

Nevaeh peered down at the business card, none of it really registering except for the DEA seal.

How did she do that? Nevaeh thought. Made it seem like I have to talk to her, or else I’m guilty?

She backed away, heading for Roddy again. But she simultaneously pulled out her phone and texted Colin again.

PLEASE answer! She wrote. But she was just repeating herself. She had to tell him something new: **It’s not just Otis Flood you for sure can’t trust.**

You and your mom can't trust Marcia Flood either

What Colin Hears

Colin found a bush to crouch behind, right at the front of Marcia Flood Creekman's house. He leaned against the bricks. Even if his mom or the other woman glanced out the window, they wouldn't see him. And he couldn't see them. But thanks to the open windows, he could hear every word they said.

"So the attorneys found you," Marcia was saying. At least, Colin assumed the woman who'd hugged Mom and invited her into her house was Marcia. "And . . . you know Frank is dead."

She spoke the words so sorrowfully, it made Colin want to cry.

This was how someone should be mourned. This was how Colin wanted to mourn his father—if only he'd known him.

And if only Colin's dad had been a good person.

Mom's voice was soft and sympathetic in reply.

"Yes, and I'm so sorry, Marcia," she murmured. "But . . . there's so much I don't understand. Why did the attorneys make it sound like you and Frank didn't know where I was? I sent you a letter with my new address as soon as I had one. Twelve years ago. So why—?"

"Felicia, I never got a letter from you," Marcia said. "You just . . . disappeared."

"You wrote back to me!" Mom snapped. "Telling me not to ever write again, because it put us both in too much danger! I still have the letter!"

Mom, who never kept anything, had held on to a letter from twelve years ago?

Probably something else she kept in the safe-deposit box, he thought glumly. Something else she didn't want me to see.

Colin heard a rustling sound that could have been from Mom unfolding a piece of paper. And then he heard a gasp—Marcia’s gasp.

“Felicia, I swear to you, I didn’t write that. I’d swear on a stack of Bibles—I never knew where you were, or what you were calling yourself.”

There was a soft thud—was it Mom clapping her hand over her mouth in astonishment? Or maybe Mom shoving Marcia away in disbelief?

Colin couldn’t tell. He turned around and inched his head up, just high enough to see over the windowsill.

It was hard making sense of anything, gazing from the sunshine outdoors into the dimmer house. But he could see that Mom and Marcia each had an arm slung over the other’s shoulder, both of them hunched together over the piece of paper in Mom’s hand.

Mom still trusts Marcia, Colin thought incredulously. Even with proof of Marcia’s lies right there in Mom’s hand . . .

Colin crouched back down before either of the women could see him.

“Did you . . . did you read anything about my father at the trial?” Marcia asked. “Did you know that Frank’s defense attorneys said that Dad forged Frank’s signature on some of the prescriptions?”

“No,” Mom said in a tight, clipped voice.

“He must have forged my handwriting, too,” Marcia said softly. “He must have intercepted my mail, and . . .”

Could Mom possibly believe a story like that?

Colin heard a sound like the squeaking of couch springs. Maybe Mom and Marcia were sitting down now.

“Don’t you trust me more than you ever trusted my father?” Marcia asked.

“I want to,” Mom whispered. “I want to believe . . .” She seemed to be choking back a sob. “But I wanted to believe Frank twelve years ago, too. I tried so hard to believe every one of his lies. Right up until I couldn’t. That made it hard for me to believe anything the lawyers told me yesterday. Or to trust it. If Frank wanted to leave any sort of legacy or inheritance or . . . or, a purpose . . . for Colin, why didn’t he try to do anything nice for Colin even once in the past eleven and a half years? Why didn’t he ever try to see him? Why did he have to make everything so mysterious?”

There was that word again: inheritance. Mom kept coming back to that. Colin remembered what Nevaeh had said in the storage area about

finding first one key, then another: “What if they’re leading you to some big treasure?”

An inheritance could be a treasure.

But a legacy? A purpose? What does that mean?

He felt dizzy. Why was Mom admitting any of this to Marcia? Why was she making it seem like she *wanted* to be lied to?

“Frank was humbled,” Marcia said. “Felicia, you would have had to have seen him after prison. He was a different man. He was so ashamed of himself, so convinced that he’d ruined everything for you and Colin—”

“He did!”

“When the attorneys found you, you told them you and Colin were doing fine, and you didn’t need a thing from your dead ex-husband’s estate,” Marcia countered.

“*I didn’t*,” Mom said, her voice harsh. “But Colin . . . he’d been asking questions. He wanted to find something good to believe about his father. That’s why I was willing to go to Pittsburgh. That’s why I’m here now.”

Like it’s all my fault? Colin thought angrily.

“Frank Creekman was a terrible person twelve years ago,” Marcia said. “And he struggled with the guilt afterward, once it really hit him what he’d done. After he’d ruined so many lives, how could he ever make up for it? For years, he thought the best thing he could do for Colin was to stay away. He thought you were *right*. He believed that all the way until a few months before he died.”

“To hear the lawyers tell it, all it took was falling in love with you,” Mom said, and now she truly did sound angry. “You changed him when I couldn’t.”

“No,” Marcia said. “Frank and I didn’t fall in love until *after* he’d changed. After he’d decided to stop feeling sorry for himself for everything he’d lost. And . . . after he’d decided he needed to make it up to all the people he’d hurt. Including you and Colin. He just . . . didn’t start looking for you and Colin soon enough. He thought he had time. He didn’t know he’d die at forty-one. He didn’t get much more of a chance to make amends than my father did.”

“Because your father died—what?—ten years ago? During the trial?” Mom asked. “Oh, Marcia, I am sorry. You lost your father young, and your husband young, too.”

Colin dared to sneak a glance through the window again. Mom seemed to be patting Marcia's back—the same way Mom would have comforted him.

She's completely fallen for Marcia's story, Colin thought incredulously. She's not being careful at all.

Colin looked down at the burner phone in his hand. It felt like time to call for help, but what was he supposed to say? *My mom is trusting someone she shouldn't trust—no, no, nothing's actually happened yet, but it could. She's being tricked.*

He'd never realized before how useless 911 could be. You couldn't call and say, *I think something bad's about to happen*. Sometimes you had to wait until the bad thing actually occurred.

If only Nevaeh were here to tell me what to do . . .

Colin missed part of what Mom and Marcia were saying. Or maybe, now that they seemed so buddy-buddy, they were speaking too softly. But then he heard Marcia say, louder and more emphatically, "All I'm asking is that you bring Colin here. Just to show him . . ."

In a panic, Colin scrambled away from the wall and the window. He wasn't ready to meet Marcia. He wasn't ready to find out what his father had left him. It had taken every ounce of courage Colin had just to read about his father on a phone screen and to listen to the podcast. And Colin hadn't even been able to finish that, before Mom took his phone away. He hadn't come clean to Mom about seeing everything in the storage unit back in Groveview—and for all he knew, he was endangering her because she *didn't* know about that.

Colin gripped the burner phone so tightly that it cut into his hand. If only it was his *real* phone, and he could just text or call or FaceTime Nevaeh. If only he'd memorized her number way back at the beginning of the summer when she first gave it to him, so he could use it with this phone. If only she had a hard-to-forget number like her dad's 1-800-JNK-KING . . .

Ohhh. . . .

He was being stupid. He could still use this phone to reach Nevaeh. It would just take a little longer.

For a second, Colin only sat there, staring at the phone. Then he scampered back to the car, climbed in, and eased the door shut as quietly as he could. He began punching numbers into the phone.

He wasn't sure his plan would work. He wasn't sure there was anything he could do that could make a difference for him and his mom.

But he had to try.

Nevaeh's Advice

Nevaeh's phone was blowing up. Her spam blocker kept telling her the same unknown number was trying to call and text her again and again—how annoying could those spammers be?

Then the phone rang again, and it was Dad. Nevaeh answered that one.

“Dad!” she cried, before she even had her phone up to her ear. “Did Mom tell you we’re at Steve’s Self-Storage and the DEA’s here, too, and—can you help by telling the cops and everybody that Colin and his mom didn’t do anything wrong?”

“Nevaeh, I will, I will, but right now . . .” Dad cleared his throat. “This is more urgent. Colin just called in on the Junk King line and he said he lost his phone so he needed your phone number, and he wouldn’t tell me anything before he talked to you—have you heard from him?”

“No!” Nevaeh exclaimed. She looked down at her phone, with all its spam messages. “Or . . . maybe?”

She hung up on her father and retrieved the strange number. She copied all the texts she’d been trying to send Colin and dumped them into a new message for that number.

Then she decided he might not have time to read all that, so she added another text:

This is what’s really important: You can’t trust anyone connected to Otis Flood. Especially not his daughter Marcia

The phone began to vibrate once more in Nevaeh’s hands. The strange number again.

This time she answered it.

“My hands are shaking too much to type,” Colin hissed. It sounded like he was trying to stay quiet, barely speaking above a whisper. “Mom and

me, we're *at* Marcia's house."

"Get away from there!" Nevaeh cried. Roddy took one look at her, then pulled her farther away from all the law enforcement officers. "Colin—it was Otis Flood who put all your baby stuff in the storage unit. Not your dad, after all. And this Otis guy hid money there, too, that everyone thinks was, like, from criminal activity. It's like he was trying to frame your mom. And you. The cops and the DEA are taking everything out now. That's DEA as in: Drug Enforcement agents."

She felt a twinge of guilt. Did she need to confess that no one would have known about the storage unit if Nevaeh's family hadn't told Sharla?

"No . . .," Colin moaned. "Mom's *in* Marcia's house, and I'm hiding out in the car. But Mom might come out to get me any minute now. What should I do? I can't just run away and leave Mom behind! I have to save Mom!"

"Colin, let's think this through—" Nevaeh began.

But Colin cut her off, shrieking, "The front door's opening now!"

"Okay, okay . . ." Nevaeh tried to sound calm, but it was impossible. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see all the DEA agents trudging in and out of the storage unit with their "evidence." If only Nevaeh and Colin and Colin's mom had evidence of their own. Proof that it was the Floods and Dr. Creekman who had done everything wrong. Not Colin or his mom.

But it wasn't as though Marcia Flood would just confess.

Or would she? Nevaeh wondered.

"Colin!" she cried. "I know what you should do! Go in there and use the phone to record everything! Do it secretly! Make her think you're on her side so she'll tell you all the bad things she did!"

"Okay, okay—I've got to go—"

"And text or call as soon as you can to let me know what happens!" Nevaeh added.

But the phone had already gone dead.

What Colin's Dad Left Him

Colin pressed Record and shoved the phone into his pocket.

It had been a false alarm about the door of Marcia Flood Creekman's house opening. He was so freaked out, he was seeing things. Maybe he should call Nevaeh back, get her to talk him through other ideas of what to do. *Safer* ideas.

Preferably ones that didn't involve walking into a criminal's house.

But Mom was in there, and Mom was probably in danger. She didn't know about the storage unit back in Groveview because Colin had never told her. And Nevaeh had said Mom was being framed. For all Colin knew, all those cops and DEA agents back in Groveview could be getting ready to arrest Mom, right now.

Colin *had* to help Mom.

His knees were shaking as badly as his hands, but he opened the SUV door again and stepped down onto the driveway. As soon as he let go, the wind caught the door and it slammed shut—surely Mom and Marcia would hear that.

That's okay, he told himself. *I'm about to walk into the house anyway.*

He forced himself to stumble up the sidewalk and knock at the front door.

"Hello?" he called, trying to make his voice sound normal for Mom and Marcia—and for the phone in his shorts pocket that was recording everything. "Mom? Uh . . . Mrs. Creekman?"

He had to blink a few times to get his eyes to adjust to looking through the screen door into the dim house.

Blink . . . There were Mom and Marcia, sitting together on a green couch, both jerking their heads toward the sound of Colin's voice.

Blink . . . There was Mom scowling at him, even as Marcia's face lit up.

Blink . . . There was Marcia scrambling awkwardly up and racing toward the door.

"Colin, I told you to wait in the car," Mom said. Behind Marcia's back, Mom was shaking her head no, even as she waved her hands in a "go, go, go!" motion.

Confused, Colin froze with his hand on the handle of the screen door.

Is Mom actually . . . scared . . . of Marcia? Colin wondered. *Then why was she sounding so friendly before?*

Before he had a chance to figure that out, Marcia was at the door, yanking it open and engulfing Colin in a huge hug. Then she stood back from him, holding his shoulders and peering intently into his face. Tears flooded her eyes.

"Oh, Colin, it's really you," Marcia murmured. Her face was soft and kind. "Looking just like I would have imagined. You have your father's chin. And . . ." She drew in a shaky breath, and went on resolutely, "What he wouldn't have given to have met you. . . ."

"But Mom said he could have met me anytime he wanted," Colin began. "She said . . ."

Behind Marcia, Mom stood up. Her headshaking was even more violent now, as if she really wanted to scream, *No, no, no!* But when Marcia turned toward Mom, Mom's expression smoothed out and she mustered up a small, forlorn smile.

"Colin, apparently there was some information I wasn't aware of," Mom said in a tight voice. "Just give us a few more minutes, and then I'll be out. Go on back to the car."

"No, no—this is about him," Marcia insisted. "Colin, come on in." It was like the two women were fighting over Colin. Marcia went on smoothly, "Can I get you something to eat? Something to drink?" She winced. "Sadly, most of what I have in the refrigerator is leftover funeral casseroles, but . . ."

"That's okay," Colin said. "I'm not hungry. Or thirsty."

Mom frowned, like she wanted Colin to fake hunger or thirst to get Marcia out of the room. But Mom's expression turned bland and empty when Marcia faced her squarely again and tugged Colin toward the couch.

“I did always want to meet my father,” Colin said. “I’m sorry he’s dead.”

Marcia gave a sad, helpless shrug.

“Did I hear you say you wanted to show me something?” Colin asked.

“Colin,” Mom said, and her face and tone were completely forbidding now.

Why was she so upset?

“Oh!” he said, pretending he’d just figured something out. “It wasn’t an inheritance or family heirlooms or anything like that, was it? I agree with what Mom’s always said. That we shouldn’t take any money from Dad. Ever.”

Too late, he realized he was doing this wrong. Wouldn’t Marcia be more likely to confess if she thought he agreed with her, not Mom? Colin probably needed to act like he was just as greedy as his father. And like he didn’t care who got hurt, as long as it made him rich.

But there was no way Colin could pretend that. Not even for the recording his phone was silently gathering.

Marcia winced.

“Colin, honey, why would you think there’s any money left?” she asked. “Your father was in prison for five years. His medical license was revoked. After he got out—a convict, a *felon*—the only job he could find was night janitor at the dog food factory. We were barely scraping by.”

“There were always rumors that Frank and Otis had hidden money somewhere, because they didn’t trust each other,” Mom said. “The prosecutors said there was money missing. Otis and Frank are both dead. Nobody’s watching anymore. Isn’t it safe now for *you* to claim what’s left behind?”

Colin squinted at Mom. Was she *trying* to get Marcia upset?

“I wouldn’t want any of that drug money either,” Marcia said. “If it even exists. No, Colin—your legacy from your dad, what I want to give you, is knowing about how he lived the last two years of his life. He was volunteering at a halfway house for addicts. He was trying to help fix some of the problems he himself had caused. And he also wanted you to see . . .” She seemed nervous all of a sudden, twisting her hands together. “Here. Let me show you.”

She turned and headed toward a closed door off to the side of the living room.

As soon as she was out of sight, Mom sprang up and grabbed Colin by the shoulders, spinning him back toward the front door.

“Colin, you have to get out of here!” Mom exclaimed. “Now!”

“What are you talking about?” Colin demanded. “A little bit ago, you were hugging Marcia. And now you’re acting like she’s going to come back with a gun or something?”

Mom was that frantic. Her eyes bulged; her face twisted. And she kept shoving Colin away.

“I had to pretend to . . . oh, Colin, there’s no time to explain,” she gasped. “But this isn’t safe for you. Go back out to the car, and I’ll handle Marcia.”

Pretend? Explain?

Colin didn’t know what Mom meant, or why she was panicking. He didn’t know what danger Marcia could be to anyone.

But if she is dangerous . . .

“You think I’d leave you behind?” Colin asked incredulously.

His knees shook and his heart pounded. But he wrapped his arm around Mom’s waist and held on.

“Whether we stay or go, we do it—” Before he could say the last word —“together”—Marcia was already coming back out from the other room.

She had something in her arms, clutched tight against her chest, wrapped in a small, pale blue blanket. She stopped beside Mom and Colin and held out the bundle, peeling back the blanket.

It wasn’t a gun.

It was . . .

Colin saw a tiny fist waving in the air. He saw tiny eyes, open just a slit. He saw a tiny, wrinkled-up nose and a tiny, twitching mouth.

“It’s a baby?” Colin cried in disbelief. “What my father wanted you to show me is a baby?”

What Nevaeh Saw but Didn't Understand

“Text back and tell me you’re safe,” Nevaeh muttered as she stood clutching her phone in the gravel parking lot of Steve’s Self-Storage. “Please please please . . .” It was killing her that she hadn’t heard back from Colin yet. Or that she couldn’t just call or text or FaceTime him again herself and find out what was going on.

Wasn’t there anything else she could do?

Oh, yeah . . .

She switched who she was talking to: “Oh, please, God, please let Colin and his mom be okay. . . .”

Somehow, that did make her feel better.

Maybe praying helped more when it wasn’t the *only* thing you did. When you weren’t just praying for help because you were too cowardly to try to fix the problem yourself.

Like she’d been before, feeling guilty about Mom’s accident.

Roddy was still beside her, and Mom was nearby, huddled with Steve. But Nevaeh didn’t try to talk to either of them. She just kept pivoting back and forth between glancing at the phone—*is there a text yet? No, not yet*—and watching the DEA agents going in and out of the storage unit and conferring with the woman who seemed to be in charge.

All of a sudden, the lead DEA agent whipped her phone out of her pocket and up to her ear. Her eyes widened, as if she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Then she rushed over to another agent to whisper in his ear. He jerked back as if she’d hit him with a jolt of electricity.

Nevaeh saw that her mother’s friend, Sharla, was right at the edge of the blocked-off area. Nevaeh rushed toward her.

“Sharla!” Nevaeh hissed. “What just happened?”

Maybe she had insider information.

But Sharla didn't pull out her own phone. She just turned and watched along with Nevaeh as the top agent scrambled into her car and shut the door. Then the woman seemed to be having a long conversation that involved waving her arms a lot.

"Whoa—something changed," Sharla said, raising an eyebrow. "New evidence, maybe? But I can't tell if it's incriminating or exculpatory."

"Incriminatal exculpa-what?" Nevaeh asked.

Sharla laughed, but in a kind way.

"Incriminating evidence makes someone look guiltier," she explained. "Exculpatory evidence proves their innocence."

"But which is it?" Nevaeh asked. "What does this mean for Colin and his mom? Would the DEA be excited about Mrs. Creedmont being guilty? Or innocent?"

Sharla kept watching the top agent.

"Right now, Nevaeh," Sharla said, "your guess is as good as mine."

The Inheritance

“That’s your baby, isn’t it,” Colin’s mom said flatly. It didn’t sound like she expected an answer from Marcia. “You and Frank had a baby together. Is that what this was about all along? You wanted to rub that in my face? Well, congratulations. I’m very happy for you.”

Colin hadn’t known it was possible for anyone to say the word “congratulations” in such a noncongratulatory way. Or the word “happy” with such misery.

Marcia blinked back tears and clutched the baby tighter.

“I don’t blame you for being upset, Felicia,” Marcia said in a steady voice. “I’m not trying to rub anything in your face. Oh . . . this isn’t the way I imagined this going. The way *Frank* and I imagined this going. I know you and Frank—”

“There hasn’t been a ‘me and Frank’ in twelve years,” Mom snapped. “I stopped loving him a long time ago. He didn’t just betray his patients—he betrayed me! And Colin. So I don’t care who he married, who he had children with. . . . I was just working on not hating him. And I was only doing that for Colin’s sake.”

She put her arm around Colin and hugged him closer to her side. It felt like she was just imitating Marcia: Each of them drawing her own child nearer. And farther from the other woman.

But Colin wasn’t a helpless baby.

He could think for himself.

And he didn’t have to think only *about* himself.

“Mom, it doesn’t just help me if you don’t hate Dad,” Colin said. “It helps you, too.”

Mom shot him a startled look, as if she'd forgotten he could speak up like that.

Probably because he never had spoken up quite like that before today.

Mom shook her head, as if trying to clear it.

"None of that even matters right now," she told Marcia. "You have a baby—great. But springing it on us like this, that's, that's—"

"You're the one who came here," Marcia said, with more steeliness in her voice than Colin would have expected.

"Because we were manipulated into it!" Mom exclaimed. Her iron grip on Colin's shoulders tightened even more. "By the mysterious instructions from the lawyers about Frank's will, saying we had to come here in person to find out the rest, and . . . Frank's dead, and he's still trying to control us! Just like his crimes controlled where we could go and how we could live twelve years ago!"

"This isn't the same as before," Marcia protested. "This isn't about any crime. It's . . ." She turned from Mom to Colin and tilted the baby toward him. "You're a big brother, Colin." Her voice seemed thick with unshed tears. "Half brother, of course, but . . . your father wanted you to be together. He knows he ruined things with you, but he had such hope for you and Caleb. . . . He wanted the two of you to be real brothers. To know each other. To *love* each other. Caleb's birth is what finally convinced Frank it was okay for him to start looking for you. He thought he'd ruined things too completely for you to need him as a dad—he was still too ashamed. But he thought you and Caleb would need each other. As brothers. And I think that's even more true now that Frank is gone."

Marcia kept holding the baby toward Colin as though she expected him to ooh and aah like people always did around babies. Or maybe she expected him to take the baby in his arms and cradle the child as tenderly as she was doing.

Colin could only stand there frozen.

Mom stepped in front of him, blocking his view of the baby.

"This is completely unfair!" Mom cried. "You can't put those expectations on Colin. Frank was never a true father to Colin—not after those first few months. I'm sorry for you, Marcia. I'm sorry you're a widow now, and that that baby doesn't have a father. But just because the same terrible person fathered him and Colin, that doesn't mean Colin owes this kid anything. Colin doesn't owe Frank anything, either, and neither do

I! I came here to renounce Frank's inheritance—to make it clear to you and the DEA and any other law enforcement agency that might be watching us. Colin and I want nothing to do with anything that Frank might have left us!"

The DEA? Colin thought.

Mom dug down into her purse, and pulled out . . . was that another burner phone?

"I've been taping this whole conversation for the DEA," she said, waving the phone in the air. "I contacted them as soon as I got the news that Frank left something to Colin in his will. I was going to clear everything up for Colin."

"Mom, what?" Colin gasped. "But I was . . ."

Should he confess that he'd been recording the conversation, too?

It didn't matter. Neither woman was even looking at him now.

Marcia clutched the baby tighter and let out a long, low moan.

"You came here to betray me?" she asked plaintively, her eyes swimming with tears now. "When I welcomed you into my house? When —?"

"No," Mom said, biting off the word. She seemed to be blinking back tears, too. "I came here hoping I could clear both our names. You can ask Colin what I told him in the car—I said I *trusted* you. In spite of everything, in spite of who you married, I was almost one hundred percent certain that you were still the noble, kind teenager who'd helped me twelve years ago. But there was just that tiny, tiny bit of doubt. . . . When the DEA first asked me to do this, I said no. I wasn't going to get involved. I wasn't going to repay your generosity by busting you, if there was even that tiny chance. I wasn't going to let Colin claim any inheritance. But then last night, Colin found out what Frank did. It felt like we were in danger all over again. Like we'd always be in danger, unless . . . unless I could get you to confess. . . . You see why I had to come here, don't you? It was either that or keep running away again and again and again."

"You were willing to sacrifice me," Marcia said.

"But I didn't, did I?" Mom asked. "I had faith in you. You *are* innocent. You're just a new mom who's, sadly, a new widow, too. You and me, we are both too damaged by everything Frank and your father did to ever be able to move on completely. As long as that missing money's out there, we will always be under suspicion. But for our children . . ."

It took Colin a moment to catch up. *The missing money*. That was what Mom had thought Marcia would confess to having. Or, at least, Mom had thought Marcia might know where the DEA could find it, and she'd feel safe talking about it now that Colin's father was dead. Mom had never truly suspected Marcia of anything else. But the missing money—and the drug dealers who'd sent death threats, trying to find it—*that* was what made Mom still feel so trapped.

And it made her feel like she'd always have to run away.

But Colin knew something Mom and Marcia didn't know. The money from Frank Creekman's and Otis Flood's crimes wasn't missing anymore. Nevaeh had just told him so.

"The money's been found," Colin said.

Neither woman seemed to hear him.

"It's *found*," Colin said again. He stepped between Mom and Marcia and held up his own burner phone. "Mom, I just talked to Nevaeh. I know you didn't want me talking to anyone, but . . . I needed help. Nevaeh told me the DEA is clearing out a storage unit in Groveview *right now*. They found a lot of cash."

He didn't want to admit yet that he'd seen that storage unit himself.

"In Groveview?" Mom repeated, her face going pale. "So they're going to suspect me. We really will have to run away again now. We'll have to leave all our friends, everything I built there over the last twelve years. . . ."

"No!" Colin protested. "They know Otis Flood put the money there. Before he died. That means—"

"So my own father was guiltier than ever?" Marcia wailed. Then a thoughtful look came over her face. "Or . . . does this mean that my father didn't completely betray Frank?"

"What?" Mom asked.

Marcia winced. Her gaze drifted toward the phone Mom still clutched in her hand. The phone that was silently recording everything. Just as Colin's burner phone was silently recording everything.

But then Marcia seemed to decide it didn't matter what anyone heard her say.

"Frank always said he'd thought he and my dad had a deal when they were arrested," Marcia said. "The government had a stronger case against Frank than my dad, so they knew Frank was in bigger trouble. But my dad

was supposed to wait for Frank to get out of prison, and then they were going to share the money they'd squirreled away. And Frank still had . . . delusions then that he could win you back. Only, my dad had his stroke before the trial was over, and he died before Frank got out of prison. So the money was just . . . gone. And then Frank changed. I swear to you, he never went looking for that money. He didn't care about it anymore. He told me he was actually glad he didn't know where it was, so it wasn't there tempting him. . . . He said, in a twisted way, it was even part of the reason that he didn't look for you when he first got out of prison. Because what if you really had gotten the money from Otis before he died? Frank didn't want to lead the cops to you and Colin, if that was the case. . . ."

"But Mom didn't have the money," Colin said. "And now that it's been found, everybody will know that. Mom's innocent. And so are you, Marcia."

He beamed at both of them. But for a moment, both women just stood there frozen, as if they couldn't catch up.

Then Mom dropped her phone back into her purse with a thud.

"That's it, then—we are free and clear of Frank and Otis, and everything and everyone who ever had anything to do with them!" she announced. "Except, I bet my name's going to be plastered all over Groveview as being connected to the two of them and that money, so Colin and I are still going to have to run away!"

Mom sank back down onto the couch and began to weep, her face in her hands, her shoulders heaving up and down. Colin had never seen her in such total despair, not even the day she'd learned about his father dying.

But he didn't feel surprised. Maybe he'd known all along that she'd always been hiding pain and grief and anger beneath her perfect mask—beneath her obsession with getting rid of clutter and throwing out broken things. Maybe he'd understood without ever knowing why.

It hurt just to watch her. So he turned away, and . . .

It hurt to see the hope fading on Marcia's face.

It hurt to see the baby blinking drowsily in Marcia's arms, completely unaware.

Just as unaware as Colin had been twelve years ago, when Mom took him and ran away from Dad.

Baby Caleb had no more control or power over his life than baby Colin had had then.

But Colin wasn't a baby now.

"Isn't this my decision, too?" Colin asked quietly, surprising even himself.

Mom stopped weeping and looked up.

"I mean, I know I'm just a kid, but I'm twelve, not two," Colin said. "You're innocent. I'm innocent. We can go back to Groveview regardless of the money. Nobody's going to arrest us."

"But people will think—" Mom began.

"Who cares what people think?" Colin asked. Even he was a little surprised hearing those words come out of his mouth. But he meant them. "The people we care about—our friends—they won't turn against us."

It was amazing how certain he could be of that.

"Look," he said. "Marcia's still living in the same town where her father and her husband committed all their crimes. If she can do that—"

"How can you do that?" Mom asked, gazing up curiously at Marcia. "How can you stand it?"

"There are still some people who won't speak to me when I run into them at the grocery," Marcia admitted. "But most people—they know I was only a teenager when my father committed all his crimes. And when he died. They feel sorry for me. They *care*. They understand I was always innocent. And they remember Frank now as a broken man who came back and rebuilt his life and tried to do his best to make up for his crimes. They forgave him. Because they saw him truly change."

Mom sniffed.

"It's too complicated," she said, so softly she seemed to be talking to herself. "It won't work. I've gotten too used to hiding. Not letting people know anything real about me."

"You haven't even let *me* know about you!" Colin protested. "But now . . . Now that I know about my dad . . . and Marcia . . . and the baby . . . and the baby and I could be . . ."

He couldn't quite pull it all together. He wasn't used to saying what he was thinking, either.

Mom recoiled. The way she was acting, the baby in Marcia's arms might as well have been a snake or a spider—something poisonous.

"Oh, Colin," she moaned. "Even if we go back to Groveview, and get our lives there back, that doesn't mean . . . what Marcia's asking . . ." She turned to face Marcia and the baby directly. "I can't do it. I just want to

walk away and forget everything about the past. Even you, Marcia. And your baby. I'm sorry."

Colin expected to feel triumph at the thought of going back to Groveview. He'd won! Hadn't he?

Didn't he want to go back and forget everything about this nightmarish weekend, too?

But he saw Marcia flinch. The baby whimpered at the sudden movement, his face screwing up in distress.

Colin remembered how it always seemed like Nevaeh's family were connected by invisible strings. What happened to one of them affected all of them. Good things and bad things, both. That was what it meant to be a family.

He and Mom and Marcia and Caleb weren't exactly a family.

Not yet.

But . . . maybe they could be?

"Mom, you can't forget," he said, his voice coming out stronger than he would have expected. "And neither can I. I can't make myself unknow everything I found out about Dad. I'm connected, whether I want to be or not. And . . . I'm connected to Caleb and Marcia, too."

"It doesn't have to mean anything," Mom whispered. "You can . . . you can just go on with your life away from them." She sniffed. "Your *normal* life."

"Why would I want my normal life back, if it could be better?" Colin asked.

"You think this is better?" Mom asked, waving her arms in clear disbelief. She seemed to be indicating Marcia's small (and, now that he thought about it, *messy*) home. She seemed to be pointing out that baby Caleb had a thin line of drool snaking down his chin, and that he was starting to smell like he'd just farted—or worse. She seemed to be indicating every problem she'd ever run away from, every person she'd left behind—even friends like Marcia and Leila—because they were all connected to Dad.

He'd always known Mom hated mess. Maybe he'd never fully understand how afraid she was of her *life* being a mess.

But he could see things differently from Mom without hating her. Or hurting her. That summer he'd learned that he could look at junk and see

art. He could also look at this baby and see . . . what? That baby Caleb also had his father's chin?

That baby Caleb was, like Colin, another kid who'd grow up without any memories of his father?

That baby Caleb was just as innocent and helpless in all of this as Colin?

Except that I'm not helpless anymore, Colin thought. *I'm twelve years ahead of Caleb, growing up.*

And maybe he could help Caleb.

He wasn't entirely sure what it would mean to agree to Marcia's request—to be Caleb's brother for real. It couldn't be like Nevaeh's family. Colin and Caleb would never live in the same house. They wouldn't have all the same inside jokes and finish each other's sentences. Maybe it would be no more of a connection than he had with the Torres babies he and Nevaeh occasionally babysat—sometimes Colin was included on the text chain when the Torres parents sent out enthusiastic pictures or video with captions like, “Matteo got his first tooth!” or “Look at Nathan tasting sweet potatoes for the first time!”

Or maybe Mom and Marcia would become friends again—true friends—and there'd be trips back and forth between Groveview, Ohio, and Eberly, Kentucky. Maybe Colin would get stuck babysitting Caleb while Mom and Marcia hung out.

And that was even assuming that Mom really did mean it, and they could go back to Groveview.

Colin also knew from babysitting the Torres twins that being around a baby meant dealing with diapers and spit-up and tears. And sometimes even earsplitting shrieks.

It made no logical sense to agree to any of that.

But he did anyway.

“This *is* better,” he said firmly. “Mom, maybe I never told you this. But I always wanted a brother.”

What Nevaeh Found Out

Everything's ok. We're coming home

When Nevaeh's phone finally dinged with that text from Colin, Nevaeh felt like turning cartwheels right there in the gravel parking lot of Steve's Self-Storage. She sent Colin a row of excited emojis: smiley faces and starry eyes and fireworks. Then she added: **So the recording worked? Tell me everything! Can you FaceTime? Then we can meet at the library as soon as you get home at**—she stopped to check how long it would take to get back to Groveview from Eberly, Kentucky—**maybe 3 p.m.?**

But Colin replied: **Sorry. Can't talk yet. And won't be home by 3.**

Nevaeh sent him a string of question marks.

Colin's reply was odd: **It's just . . . my family's not perfect like yours**

Nevaeh almost dropped her phone.

You think my family's perfect???? she typed back. **We live off junk! We argue all the time! We don't have enough money! My mom just had a bad car wreck! We**

Nevaeh was a fast texter, but her fingers couldn't keep up with her thoughts. Didn't Colin remember how Roddy and Prilla had fought in Pittsburgh? Or how Nevaeh had practically had to knock their heads together to get them to make up?

Okay, actually, Colin doesn't know about that. Because I never told him . . .

Didn't Colin know both Nevaeh's dad and Roddy had been total fools? Everything would have been so much simpler if Dad had just told Mrs. Creedmont ages ago about the storage unit that Otis Flood set up. Or if

Roddy had spoken up about the key to the storage unit, rather than anonymously leaving it on Colin's porch. Or . . .

I guess Colin doesn't know about that, either. Because there hasn't been time to explain . . .

Nevaeh erased her text and tried to think what to say instead. Roddy elbowed her.

"Hold on," Nevaeh mumbled without looking up. "Let me answer Colin first."

Roddy said something she didn't really listen to. She kept staring at her phone without typing anything.

Useless, she thought.

When she finally glanced up, Roddy was no longer beside her. But a giant Junk King truck had appeared across the parking lot, along with the ancient pickup they all called the Jalopy. Mom, Dad, Axel, Dalton, Roddy, and Prilla were all gathered around the trucks. Axel's fiancée, Lucy, and Dalton's girlfriend, Sadie, were there, too. Nevaeh could guess that Dad, Axel, and Dalton had come back early from their junk run, and Prilla had picked up Lucy and Sadie in the Jalopy.

Of course her whole family had shown up.

It figures I'm left out, Nevaeh thought.

But just then Prilla waved her over. Even as Nevaeh rushed toward the rest of her family, she heard Roddy say, "And another thing, while you're already mad at me, Dad. I'm going away to college next year to study physics. I'm not going into the junk business with you and Axel and Dalton."

Dad clutched his heart, but Mom wrapped her good arm around Dad's waist and said in an even tone, "We're not the least bit surprised by that, Roddy. Of course you should follow your own dreams."

Dad winced, but muttered, "Ugh. Why is your mother always right?"

Nevaeh ran to her sister's side and nudged Prilla.

"You tell, too," she whispered. "So it's not just Roddy taking the heat."

Prilla looked startled, because it was Nevaeh advising Prilla again, not the other way around.

Hey, maybe I'll make a habit of this, Nevaeh thought.

Prilla stepped toward Dad and Mom, and said, "I'm going to college, too."

Dad threw his hands up and said, "Of course! Of course!"

And then everyone talked at once. Axel's fiancée was saying something about how she and Axel had finally set their wedding date, and fortunately it was before the twins would leave for college—she was already acting like they would really go. Sadie was saying something about how her dad was an attorney, and of course he'd help both the Greeveys and Colin and his mom with the DEA, if they needed it.

Everyone was being so loud and Greevey-like—even Sadie and Lucy—that Nevaeh almost missed it when Dad turned to her and asked, “What about you? Are you going to follow in Roddy's and Prilla's footsteps, too? Or mine?”

This was Nevaeh's chance to say what she wanted from the very beginning of the summer: *I hate junk! I hate being called a junk princess! I'm sick of wearing hand-me-downs! I want to be like Mrs. Creedmont, not like you!*

But she opened her mouth—and couldn't say any of it. It wasn't just that she didn't want to hurt Dad's feelings. It was that none of that was entirely true anymore. It wasn't exactly false, either. It was just . . . complicated.

“Dad, I'm going to follow in my own footsteps,” she said, with great dignity. “But . . . I'll always be a Greevey. No matter what.”

She could see some of the DEA agents casting glances toward her noisy family, as if they couldn't understand why anyone would want to have a giant family reunion in the midst of a serious investigation. Maybe someday Nevaeh would have to explain it on some witness stand somewhere, along with everything else that she and Colin had uncovered.

But she wasn't worried about that now.

She glanced down at her phone once more, because she didn't want to leave Colin hanging. She saw that Colin had added to his last text. Now it said:

It's just . . . my family's not perfect like yours

But we're good now

And Nevaeh knew exactly what she wanted to text back: **My family's not perfect either. But we're good now too**

The Ending

All summer long, Colin and Nevaeh had had a tradition. Every time they solved a mystery big enough to make the local newspaper, they would meet at the Groveview Public Library to read the online story together the very first moment it was available.

But this time was different. This time, no one from any news media had interviewed them or taken their picture. So no reporter had excitedly let them know exactly when the news would come out.

This time, they only happened to be hanging out together at the library, catching up, on the Monday after Colin got home from Kentucky. And then Colin got a text from his mom: **You might want to look at the Groveview Press website. The story's up.**

“‘Might want to’?” Nevaeh exploded in disbelief. “*Might?*”

Colin was already calling up the website. The story they wanted to read was at the top of the page, along with a picture of the chaos at Steve's Self-Storage on Saturday:

MISSING DRUG MONEY FOUND IN GROVEVIEW

Acting on a tip from unnamed sources, law enforcement officials this weekend raided a Groveview self-storage unit and found more than \$1 million believed to have been missing for over a decade from a drug case in Kentucky.

“We're grateful to the responsible citizens who spoke up as soon as they learned of the stash,” the Drug Enforcement Administration said in a press release. “This sends a message to criminals everywhere that no matter what, you will be found out eventually.”

Steve Owens, owner of Steve's Self-Storage, said he was “stunned and appalled” to discover that the customer who signed

the rental agreement had used a fake name to hide his identity—and possibly to frame someone else for his crimes.

The DEA said that the money left in the storage unit came from illegal drug sales made by Franklin Creekman and Otis Flood, both of Eberly, Kentucky.

The story of their crimes was recounted in a popular serial podcast and a bestselling book, *Deadly Doctor: How an MD and His Pharmacist Friend Destroyed a Community with Drugs*.

Creekman, a doctor, served five years in federal prison and had his medical license revoked after he was convicted of selling prescriptions. Flood, a pharmacist, was charged as an accomplice, but was offered a reduced sentence in exchange for testifying against Creekman.

Flood never served his time, as he had a disabling stroke during Creekman's trial and never recovered. He died a year later.

"Matching up the dates, it appears that Otis Flood, while awaiting trial, drove to Ohio to hide the money," Althea Rogers, DEA spokesperson, said. "He gave his name as 'Franklin Creeman,' so this might have been part of his effort to make his former partner look guiltier. One theory is that he intended to retrieve the money later. But his stroke occurred that very evening, and he was incapacitated."

Franklin Creekman died earlier this summer.

The money retrieved from the storage unit will be deposited in the U.S. Treasury, which is what always happens in such cases. DEA officials said they would also confiscate a previously hidden bank account set up by Otis Flood to pay for the storage unit rental.

"They don't say anything about *why* Otis Flood chose a storage unit in Groveview," Colin said, scanning quickly to the bottom of the story. "They don't mention Mom or me living here or being connected at all."

"Nope," Nevaeh agreed, with a sigh of relief. "They don't say anything about me or my family, either. We *all* get to be anonymous."

It was funny how excited Nevaeh had been to have everybody know about the first few mysteries she and Colin had solved, earlier in the summer—and how excited she was now *not* to have people know what she'd done. Just a few weeks ago, she'd been secretly thrilled to be called

one of “Groveview’s very own young Sherlock Holmeses.” Now, she adored the words “unnamed sources.”

She brought up the story on her own phone so she could scroll through it again line by line.

“It’s like, since we know everything about what really happened, we can see all the ways the DEA is kind of hiding the truth,” Nevaeh said slowly. “Not that they’re lying, but . . .”

“They’re protecting us by not telling everything,” Colin agreed. “Protecting us and protecting Steve and, really, all of Groveview.”

“Gah!” Nevaeh exclaimed, making a face as if she had a bad taste in her mouth. “Who’d ever guess that I’d be happy to keep Steve Owens safe from being known as a buffoon?”

She thought of the way Steve had let her and Roddy look over his shoulder at his computer. She thought of how she’d overheard him tell one of the DEA agents, “I’ve known Felicia Creedmont for twelve years, and I can assure you she’s a law-abiding citizen. Anyone in Groveview would vouch for her.”

Steve was a jerk a lot of the time, but he wasn’t *just* a jerk. Even he had his good moments.

“Nevaeh,” Colin said quietly. “We *don’t* know everything about what really happened. We just know more than the newspaper reporter does. And more than the DEA.”

Nevaeh patted his arm.

“But do you know enough?” she asked.

They now knew that, according to the handwriting expert Nevaeh’s dad dealt with all the time, Otis Flood truly had forged the letter Colin’s mom thought had come from Marcia Flood.

They knew that, as far as anyone could tell, Colin’s dad truly hadn’t known where Colin and his mom went when they left him.

They knew that none of the Greeveys or Creedmonts had been charged with any crimes.

They knew that, once the DEA investigation ended, Colin and his mom were likely to be given the photo album from the storage unit, along with some of the other items that had only sentimental value.

But they still didn’t actually know if Otis Flood had intended to share the money he’d hidden. They didn’t know why he’d left the storage unit key with Nevaeh’s dad. The DEA thought it was a risky move by a

desperate man, another way to make himself look innocent if the DEA—or the drug dealers who wanted the missing money—found it before Otis felt safe coming back for it. But he might also have expected Nevaeh's dad to eventually give the key to Colin's mom. (Whenever anyone brought up that theory, Nevaeh always said, "Obviously Otis Flood never saw how bad my dad and Colin's mom were at talking to each other!")

Colin and Nevaeh also didn't know if the elaborate way Otis Flood had arranged the furniture in the storage area was supposed to make Colin's dad look guiltier—or more innocent.

"I still wish I could find a signed letter from Otis Flood confessing that he'd framed my dad from the very beginning, and Dad's just as innocent as Mom and Marcia," Colin said. "But I know that's not going to happen. Dad was guilty twelve years ago. I know that now. And . . . Mom was braver than I thought."

It took knowing what his father had done, to understand everything his mom had dealt with over the past twelve years.

He still didn't really feel like he could ever understand his father. He figured he would probably always wonder why someone who was already a doctor, someone who already had plenty of money—someone who had taken an oath to help people—had chosen instead to make more money for himself by destroying other people's lives.

But he didn't have to wonder anymore about what his mother was hiding from him.

He'd set out to find out about his father, and he'd learned more about his mother instead.

He knew now that she hadn't just been trying to protect him from the *facts* about his dad, but also from the terror she'd felt running away.

That was why she hadn't wanted him to know everything, even as they were driving to Kentucky.

Now that the danger was gone, Mom hadn't magically turned into a completely different person. She said it would take a while to get out of the habit of being afraid. But she already seemed calmer now, more easygoing. And Colin could definitely get used to that.

He was also getting used to the notion of having a baby brother. Er—half brother.

No, I'll just go with baby brother, he told himself.

“You and your mom really stayed the whole rest of the weekend with Marcia, and helped her clean her house?” Nevaeh said doubtfully.

“You know Mom—cleaning and decluttering makes her happy,” Colin said. “She said that was what she could do to help.”

He’d gotten stuck pulling weeds in Marcia’s backyard garden. But he hadn’t really minded, because both Marcia and Mom had helped. And they’d each told him stories they’d heard about his dad when he was a little boy—when he wasn’t a doctor yet, and he wasn’t a criminal yet, and he wasn’t an ex-con yet, and he wasn’t a guy trying to repair his messed-up life. He was just a kid.

And now those stories were part of Colin’s life, part of Colin’s memories.

So he knew his dad wasn’t all bad—which was maybe what he’d wanted to find out all along.

“Yes, I know enough,” Colin said to Nevaeh now. “Sorry for dragging your family into it. I kind of feel like it was my fault your mom had that car wreck.”

“I thought it was *my* fault!” Nevaeh exclaimed. “But I felt a lot better after talking to Mom. She doesn’t blame either of us.”

“She’s nice like that,” Colin said.

Nevaeh snorted.

“You should hear how she’s been teasing my dad, that he had a key to a storage unit containing a million dollars just sitting on his shelf for the past ten years, and he didn’t even know it,” she said. “She says, ‘Are you *sure* you know the difference between trash and treasure?’”

“He was just protecting my mom,” Colin said. “And he didn’t know what to do.”

“Honestly, it’s kind of nice to know that sometimes grown-ups aren’t so sure of themselves either,” Nevaeh said. She tapped her finger against the case of her phone. “I know you and your mom don’t ever go to church, but there’s this thing our minister says sometimes at the end of a service, after talking about forgiveness. It’s something like, ‘the past has no final hold on you.’ And that’s how I feel—it’s like I still *remember* how awful I felt about Mom’s accident. But I’m not trapped by it anymore.”

Colin liked that, too.

It kind of seemed like his mom wasn’t trapped by her past anymore, either, and neither was Colin.

He could imagine the two of them going back to Pittsburgh to visit Leila again. He could imagine them going back to Kentucky to visit Marcia and Caleb. And to hear more about Colin's dad, and how he'd changed after he got out of prison.

"I think I'm even ready to forgive Roddy for not telling us sooner that he was the one who gave you the storage unit key," Nevaeh said.

"Yeah, me, too," Colin said. "He was trying to help."

"And I'll miss him if he and Prilla really do go away to college next year," Nevaeh said.

She could feel that possibility hovering off in the distance—it seemed more real now, since they'd told Mom and Dad. It seemed real that all sorts of things could change.

"Nevaeh, I'll miss hanging out with your whole family when we have to go back to school in a few weeks," Colin said.

"But you'll miss me most of all, won't you?" Nevaeh teased. "Because I'm the best!"

She said it as a joke, a throwaway line. Because she didn't want to think too much about missing anybody. But Colin went still, his back rigid in the stiff library chair.

"You are the best," he said quietly. "Everything good that happened this summer was because of you. You made me brave. You got me through my father dying and my mother freaking out. All those mysteries we solved—my own mystery most of all . . . I couldn't have done any of it without you."

"Colin, stop!" Nevaeh protested. "You sound like you're giving a eulogy at a funeral. *I'm* not going anywhere!"

"Except to a different middle school than mine," Colin countered.

That was one of the changes Nevaeh hadn't wanted to think about.

"We'll still be friends," she said. "You know, we Greeveys never let go of anyone or anything."

This was only a small exaggeration. Nevaeh had even made up with all the sixth-grade friends she'd been annoyed with at the beginning of the summer. So she didn't feel too jealous that Ree, the other new friend they'd made this summer, would be going to the same middle school as Colin, not her.

She'd even figured out that, if she had to, she could get her mom's friend, who was a secretary at the other middle school, to make sure that

Ree and Colin had the same lunch period. So they'd be set, too.

"We won't see each other every day," Colin said. "And what will we do about the Mystery Solvers?"

There it was. Something else Nevaeh had been trying not to think about.

She remembered deciding a week ago that the "business" she and Colin had created was embarrassingly childish. They hadn't made a dime from it.

"Maybe we've outgrown it?" Nevaeh asked.

At the same time, Colin was saying, "Maybe we need to wait to grow into it? I mean, that was a million-dollar drug case. We could have messed up the DEA's investigation. . . ."

Nevaeh started laughing.

"Doesn't it feel like we're both right?" she asked. They were twelve; it was possible to feel too old for something and too young for it, all at once. "How about if we wait until the next case that's worth our talents? This one's going to be hard to top."

Colin hoped he'd never face another mystery like the one they'd just solved. Or one that was linked so tightly with his own life.

But he stuck out his hand and said, "Deal." Then he groaned. "I don't know if we'll have time for it, anyhow. I hear there's a lot of homework in middle school."

"Don't remind me." Nevaeh rolled her eyes. "At least Axel and Dalton and Prilla and Roddy have warned me which teachers give homework you can ignore, and which ones make you turn it in for a grade."

"And Derek, Daryl, and Deepak warned me," Colin said. It kind of felt like he'd gained three big brothers *and* a little brother this summer. Suddenly he remembered one of the specific things he'd heard about seventh grade. "Deepak says there's this one language arts teacher who makes everyone write essays the first day about 'What I did this summer and what it taught me.'"

"That's cruel and unusual punishment," Nevaeh said, understanding immediately.

"What would you write, if you had that teacher?" Colin asked.

"Easy," Nevaeh said. "I'd write about meeting you."

"The whole story?" Colin asked.

“Of course not,” Nevaeh replied instantly. “I wouldn’t give away your secrets. Or mine. Especially not to a teacher I don’t even know yet.” She held up her phone with the newspaper article still glowing on the screen. “I’d tell about as much of the whole story as *this* is the whole story of what was in that storage unit. What would you write?”

“Same,” Colin said. “I’d write about meeting you.”

Both of them were quiet for an instant, thinking about what a full summer they’d had.

“Maybe I will write it all down someday,” Nevaeh said slowly. “Not for a teacher or anyone else. Just for you and me.”

“You do that, and I’ll supply the pictures,” Colin said.

Maybe he would even pull together a video of all the important photos from the past three months. He could start with a picture or two of junk that he hadn’t wanted to throw away—like the Tupperware permanently stained with spaghetti sauce in a way that looked like roses. Then he’d have a picture of two shoeboxes other kids had left in their attics fifty years ago—and the picture he’d taken of those two kids (now adults in their fifties) meeting for the first time since they were twelve. Next, he’d include a picture from the 1930s that looked like it might be a picture of two ghosts, along with a picture of the Lane-Rhodes Funeral Home, Groveview’s first ever Zucchini Festival, and their friend Ree hugging her grandmother.

And finally, there’d be a picture of the Cathedral of Learning from Pittsburgh, the heart-shaped locks on the Schenley Bridge, and the dark, windy back roads on the way to Eberly, Kentucky. He’d finish with a picture his mom had taken of him holding baby Caleb.

Instantly, he realized what was missing: somehow he didn’t have any pictures of just him and Nevaeh.

“Want to take a selfie together?” he asked Nevaeh, feeling suddenly nostalgic. “So we never forget this summer?”

“We’re never going to forget this summer, anyhow,” Nevaeh said. “But, sure.”

Colin held his phone at arm’s length, angling it so that he got the Groveview Public Library sign behind them. For a second, the image froze on the screen: both of them grinning a little too widely, Colin’s nose sunburnt from his time in Marcia Creekman’s garden, Nevaeh’s hair puffing out from her ponytail. You couldn’t see just by looking that Colin

felt like he knew who he was now and where he came from. You couldn't see that Nevaeh felt forgiven for lying to her mom (and had vowed to be more careful with the truth in the future). You couldn't see that both of them felt like they were right where they belonged—in Groveview—but that someday, like Prilla and Roddy, they might want to explore more of the world beyond.

You couldn't see any of that, just by looking at the picture.

But Colin and Nevaeh both knew it was all true.

Colin held his phone out to show Nevaeh the picture.

“Trash or treasure?” he asked.

“Treasure, of course,” she said. “That’s something you’ll want to keep forever.”

Acknowledgments

It's always a little poignant to finish writing a series, because I start missing the characters almost immediately. I feel lucky to have gotten to spend so much time over the past three years thinking about Nevaeh and Colin, as well as Nevaeh's quirky family, Colin's resolute mom, and their whole community. My gratitude is especially intense with this series because I originally pitched the idea in mid-2020, at a time of great uncertainty and anxiety for the publishing industry (and, truly, the whole world) due to the Covid pandemic. I'm extremely grateful to my agent, Tracey Adams, and my then-editor, Katherine Tegen, for their steadiness in telling me, essentially, "Yes, write this series. Everything will work out." None of us knew *how* anything would work out, but their encouragement enabled me to just focus on the writing and move forward.

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I'm also grateful to my friend Julia Wharff Piermont for telling me her family's experience with the items left in a storage unit for multiple years, so I could figure out how to depict the deterioration—or lack of deterioration—of the items Colin and Nevaeh discovered.

The Stolen Key is my fifty-first published book. (I know, I know: a strange milestone to celebrate, but bear with me.) When I was a kid daydreaming about becoming an author—and then a new author, just breaking into the profession—I viewed writing as a completely solitary pursuit: It would be just me and my imagination and either a typewriter (what I visualized as a kid) or a computer (what I actually use). The longer I work in this career, the more I see how completely *un*-alone I am every time I sit down at the computer. Just like Nevaeh and Colin growing to understand their connections to their families and hometown and the wider world, I am constantly seeing how many others influence my work, going back decades. I am indebted to my parents and grandparents, who read to me before I could read myself; my teachers and professors who taught me everything from how to print my name to how to do literary analyses; friends and family members and fellow writers who forgive me when they tell me random information and then my eyes glaze over and I start muttering, "Well, what if . . ."; teachers and librarians and booksellers and parents and kids I've met during author events all over the world, who tell me what they like (and, sometimes, dislike) about various books. Thank you to all of you.

And if you don't happen to be in one of the above categories, and you have come to this book fresh and new, then I owe a special thanks to you, for joining into this long line of readers and writers, all of us linked together. Welcome!

About the Author



Photo credit Caroline Rose Photography

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX once found a key in her own yard that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere—to this day, she wonders who (and what) it belonged to. After growing up on a farm in Ohio, Margaret worked as a newspaper reporter and copy editor in Indiana before her first book, *Running Out of Time*, was published. She has since written more than fifty books for kids and teens, including its sequel, *Falling Out of Time*, the Mysteries of Trash and Treasure series, the Greystone Secrets series, the Shadow Children series, the Missing series,

the Children of Exile series, *Remarkables*, *The School for Whatnots*, and many other stand-alones. Margaret and her husband, Doug, now live in Columbus, Ohio, where they raised their two kids. You can learn more about her at haddixbooks.com.

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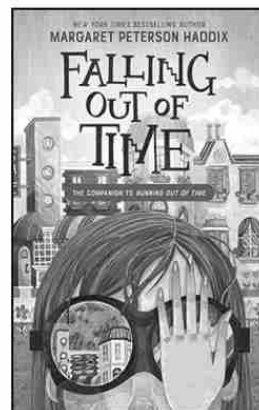
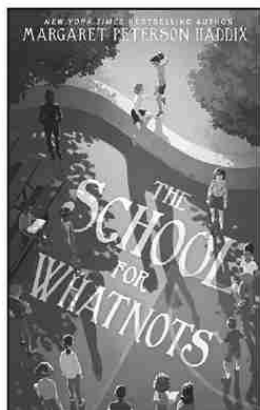
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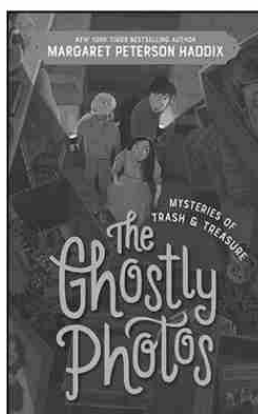
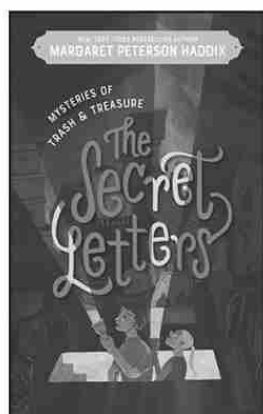
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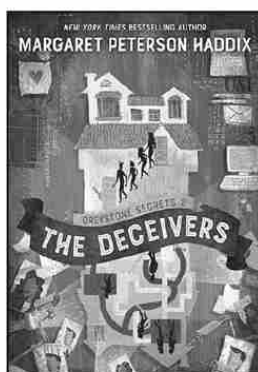
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